



Rhino horn smuggled as trinkets

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International traffickers have tried many ways to smuggle African rhino horns to Asia, concealing them inside wooden Buddha statues, stashing horn pieces in lobster heads kept in a refrigerated container and disguising horn portions as the bases of painted statues.

Now, conservationists say, some criminal groups are processing rhino horns into powder and trinkets before export, a trend that could reflect changing consumer tastes and make it harder for police to intercept the illegal cargo.

The development highlights the difficulty of countering criminal syndicates, some of which include Chinese nationals, which show versatility in the face of periodic anti-poaching successes by security officials, who have reported confiscations of intact rhino horns at OR Tambo International Airport in past months.

South Africa, which has about 80% of the continent's rhinos, has experienced record levels of poaching in the past decade.



(<https://d3rp5jatom3eyn.cloudfront.net/asset/horn-smuggled-as-trinkets2017-09-200.jpg>)
 TOO OBVIOUS: With officials cottoning on to rhino horn smuggling, traffickers have taken to hiding the powder in trinkets. PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED

TRAFFIC

Recent investigations by police discovered small, home-based workshops where rhino horns were cut into small pieces, beads and bracelets, or packaged as powder, TRAFFIC, a wildlife trade monitoring network, said in an analysis released on Monday.

The development will test overstretched law enforcement agencies if traffickers expand such operations, and growing evidence that swindlers are making fake rhino horn products out of cow horns adds to the challenge, the report said.

"If someone walks through an airport wearing a necklace made of rhino horn, who's going to stop them?" said Julian Rademeyer, who co-wrote the report and is the author of "Killing for Profit", a book about the illegal rhino horn trade.

Rademeyer said he had been aware of the increasing phenomenon of locally manufactured rhino horn products destined for export since last year. Similarly, elephant ivory products have also been produced in Africa before shipment to illegal markets elsewhere.

The TRAFFIC report cites a June case in which police raided a house east of Johannesburg and found a workshop containing large rhino horn beads, some of them polished, and horn pieces cut into cylindrical shapes.

Two Chinese nationals and a Thai woman were arrested.

In a 2016 case, the report said, police conducting a raid in Johannesburg with a large Chinese community seized a bag of rhino horn powder, a large number of ivory bangles and carvings, pangolin scales and other illegal items.

Two suspects were arrested.

Vietnam and China have the main illegal markets for rhino horn, which is viewed by consumers as a treatment for cancer, hangovers and other ailments, even though it is made from the same substance as human fingernails and there is no

evidence that it has medicinal value.

Wealthy consumers perceive a horn as a status symbol and there is also a growing market for rhino horn jewellery and other trinkets of the kind being produced in South Africa before export.

A researcher who was not involved in the TRAFFIC study said the local manufacture of rhino horn products was a “fairly new” development because horn processing usually occurred in Asia.

“This obviously creates a different problem for us to detect it and to stop the trade,” said Melville Saayman, a professor in tourism management and economics at North-West University, who led a survey of rhino horn consumers in Vietnam.

“A large number of people prefer the powder, but there are those who use it for lucky charms. So they would like a piece of the horn,” Saayman said.

He added that Asian distributors and sellers traditionally prefer to receive intact horns from Africa because then they can chop them into whatever form to meet consumer needs.

TRAFFIC's China team have noted rhino horn beads and bracelets for sale on the internet, indicating that rhino horn is “morphing into a luxury product trade” in addition to its use in traditional medicine, said Tom Milliken, a rhino expert at the wildlife trade monitoring network.

“Also, no one along the trade chain from Africa to Asia is really looking for rhino horn products, the law enforcement focus is completely on horns or pieces of horns,” Milliken said.

“Thus, the production in Africa probably achieves a dual purpose: It's cheaper to produce the products and the products are more likely than horns to be smuggled with impunity.”

NAMPA/AP