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## Legalising rhino horn trade will be a disaster

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**A ministerial panel is reviewing policies on international trade in rhino products. Any move to legalise this trade would be a disaster — for the remaining population of wild rhinos, for South Africa's tourism and for impoverished people living near our wildlife reserves.**



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Covid-19 is putting more poaching pressure on wildlife globally, as unemployment in communities that border wildlife reserves spikes and as people resort to harvesting bushmeat to survive. Although damaging, this will be like nothing compared with the environmental and economic carnage that will ensue if any aspect of the international trade in rhino horn is legalised.

This is the vision being debated by an advisory panel convened by Environment Minister Barbara Creecy to review SA's policies relating to the trade of, among other things, rhino products.

Open markets offer an effective and sustainable solution to most conservation challenges. As prices respond to the interplay of demand and supply, producers and consumers are incentivised to invest and act in ways that maximise their returns and needs — which in normal circumstances, would directly align with long-term conservation outcomes.

The thriving game lodge industry along the borders of South Africa's national parks and the associated abundance of wildlife there bear testimony to this fact.

However, when the alignment between private and environmental returns breaks down, the outcomes of market processes can be extremely damaging. One such market distortion underpins the global market for rhino horn. As a result, any move to legalise this trade internationally, however small and seemingly insignificant, will have disastrous consequences for the survival of rhinos in the wild.

The specific demand, supply and organisational characteristics of the global rhino horn market mean that even a partial legalisation in trade will create massive poaching pressure on the remaining wild population which will be impossible to contain.

How so?

Estimating the extent of potential global demand can be drawn from actual pan-African rhino poaching statistics in the late 1970s that confirm that Asian demand for horn fluctuated between 45-70 tons annually.

Regarding supply, the SA Government in 2014 calculated that using privately farmed and public stocks of horn, SA could sustainably supply a maximum of five tons annually.

Given this disparity, any legalisation in the trade of rhino horn would immediately unleash a spike in actual demand — and black-market prices. The gulf between global potential demand and the maximum possible legal supply (easily 40 tons per annum) would simply be overcome through increased poaching of wild rhino.

The price inelasticity of horn supply means that it would take at least 30 years of intensive breeding for the rhino farming industry to meet the lower level of the likely annual demand.

Simply put, the small number of farmed rhino will not remotely be able to supply the appetite for horn of a growing cohort of increasingly affluent Asian consumers, with predictable consequences for horn prices and poaching levels — especially since the “medicinal qualities” of farmed products are considered inferior to those from the wild.

Regardless of the inflationary price effects of legalisation, poaching of wild rhinos is always less expensive than farming, breeding and dehorning, providing an additional twist to the incentive to poach.

The final characteristic of the global rhino horn market is its control by well-heeled criminal syndicates that oversee every link in the supply chain. These are globally integrated operations controlled by powerful criminal enterprises whose leverage extends across the regulatory and criminal justice systems that participating governments will deploy to oversee any future legal trade.

Under-resourced, weak and vulnerable to corruption, the record shows that the statutory bodies charged with policing trade are notoriously susceptible to the inducements and intimidation of the interests that control the black market.

History shows — in respect of both ivory and rhino horn — that it is inconceivable for any legalised trade channel to retain its integrity and to not be contaminated by illegal supplies.

The net effect of any legalisation of trade, no matter how proscribed, will be as predictable as it is unintended: an acceleration in the poaching of wild rhinos globally, to the point where they will rapidly disappear outside of small, protected farms and zoos.

Beyond its impact on the species, this would be disastrous for SA's tourism industry and the many rural jobs and livelihoods that depend on it. Pre-Covid-19, tourism had emerged as a prime driver of inclusive growth. Thanks to its broad base, labour-intensity and geographical dispersion across deep rural areas, wildlife tourism offers enormous long-term potential for small business creation, employment and foreign exchange earnings.

Most international tourists to SA are drawn by our wildlife and Western Cape offerings. Tourism arrivals would be gravely affected if South Africa were to lose its rhinos in the wild — if we became, in effect, a “Big Four” safari destination.

Post-Covid, the brand SA must cultivate to capitalise on the re-emergence of global travel is that of an ethical wildlife destination, uncompromised by any associations with criminality, exploitation and unsustainability. These negative associations will unavoidably accompany any international legalisation of the rhino horn trade.

The evidence on legalising any international trade in rhino horn is abundantly clear. It will decimate the world's surviving wild rhino population and undermine SA's tourism growth prospects. Why would we jeopardise a R120-billion per annum tourism industry for a speculative trade in rhino horn — which at best will generate R1-billion per year?

And in the post-Covid era, do we really believe the world will take kindly to the legalisation of any trade in endangered wildlife products in light of our new-found appreciation of the potentially calamitous effects of zoonotic disease?

Minister Creecy should, therefore, be bold in responding to the deliberations of her high-level panel. She should ban outright all trade in rhino products. And, to kill any forward speculation and hoarding, she should communicate the unambiguous message that South Africa will not countenance any legalisation of trade in rhino horn — for at least the next 20 years.

Only through these measures will the world's wild rhino population and the tourism industry that depends on it be spared the certain destruction that will accompany any form of legalisation. **DM**

Covid-19 has fundamentally changed the world we live in. We worry about our parents, our children, our jobs and lives. **This pandemic is the most successful terrorist of all time**, leaving the entire world in a communal state of anxiety and fear. Amid the chaos, some good has surfaced: science, the oft-ignored nerdy little brother of popular culture, is finally taking its rightful place in the spotlight. Facts matter. Expertise is, once again, held in high regard.

Journalists have also been categorised as 'essential services'. Our team has been working tirelessly to provide factual information and to ensure that the 24-hour Covid-19 news cycle is written and reported with due care and process. In their careers, they have covered harrowing events but only time will tell if this pandemic will be categorised as 'the worst'. As one of the few online dailies without a paywall, or ever intending to put up a paywall, we welcome every new reader because by having them on our site we know that our public service journalism is working, that we are the trusted source of factual information in a time of wholesale misinformation and outright lies.

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