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WILDLIFE JUSTICE ANALYSIS

Rhino horn trafficking case
sheds light on curious criminal
network involving frozen
seafood, 'mishandled baggage'



Seized rhino horn, elephant tusks and leopard skins at the Hong Kong Customs and Excise headquarters in Hong Kong, China, 7 August 2013. (Photo: EPA / Alex Hofford)



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The Wildlife Justice Commission has published details of a rhino horn trafficking case that includes the use of frozen seafood and ‘mishandled baggage’, as well as the failure of authorities not to publicly report their seizure of the horn.

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The Wildlife Justice Commission recently published a new report, *Dirty Money: The Role of Corruption in Enabling Wildlife Crime*. Among other things, it

details an ongoing rhino horn trafficking case that sheds light on the complex and corrupt networks that facilitate this kind of organised crime, including the fishy use of frozen seafood and lost luggage.

The Wildlife Justice Commission unveiled the skeleton of the case but did not add flesh to the bones by naming suspects, the source and destination country, and other specific details as the case is linked to ongoing investigations. The case came to light through a joint investigation between the Wildlife Justice Commission and a pair of national law enforcement agencies.

You can read the whole report, including the sketch of this curious case, [here](#).

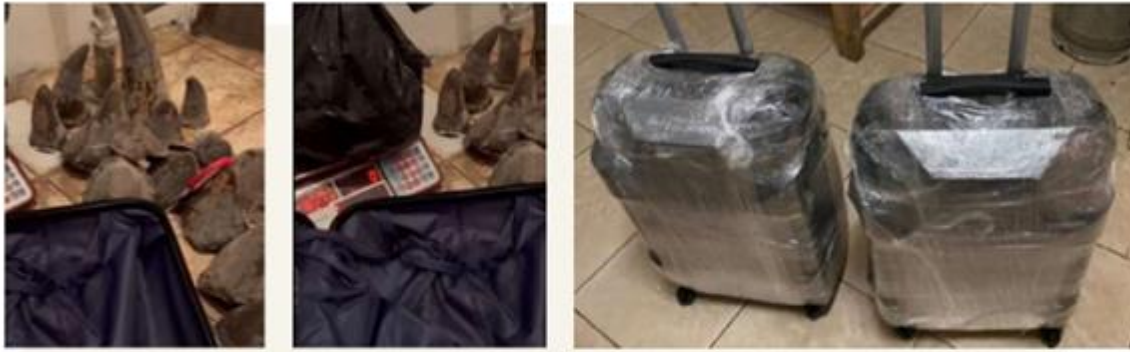
“This investigation is focused on a large, global wildlife trafficking network operating primarily in four countries, but with a reach that extends far beyond the borders of these countries. Its key associates are nationals of at least four different countries. The network is well established and known to have been operating for many years,” the report says.

“This rhino horn trafficking incident was initially detected through undercover engagement with a key associate.”

Read more in Daily Maverick: [‘Godfather’ and SA man nabbed in major rhino horn busts in New York, Singapore](#)

It goes on to thread together how the horn smuggling operation worked.

“In April 2022, three different principals agreed to cooperate in sending a rhino horn shipment from Source Country 1 to the Destination Country. They were not equal investors, with each one owning different quantities of horn in the shipment, but the cooperation enabled transportation and facilitation costs to be shared, thereby reducing the overall financial risk to each principal in the event of a seizure,” the report says.



Images 5, 6, 7: Rhino horns being weighed and packed in suitcases, and the plastic wrapped suitcases ready for shipping. Source: Wildlife Justice Commission.



Image 8: Photo sent by Subject C of the loaded baggage (identifying details have been redacted). Source: Wildlife Justice Commission.

Professional operation

What is striking about this state of affairs is the business-like approach, with “investors” sharing the risk to reduce costs and minimise potential losses. It is almost as if the numbers were crunched on a spreadsheet and discussed in the C-suite.

One of the unnamed suspects, “Subject C”, is a supplier and shipper of rhino horn who has belonged to the same criminal network for at least four years.

“Subject C claims he can obtain a large amount of horn in a short amount of time. Once the horn is sourced, there is a 24-hour window for the buyer to make the payment and secure the product before it will be sold to other customers, suggesting that he does not stockpile product,” the report says.

And if he’s not stockpiling then then he is presumably putting in orders that can be quickly filled. Would that come from an animal poached on demand?

“Subject C previously worked in the travel industry for more than 10 years, including with a regional airline, a major international airline and other aviation and travel companies. He maintains a network of contacts at these companies and across three airports in Source Country 1 that he uses to facilitate the transportation of rhino horn shipments,” the report goes on to say.

This points to aviation and travel companies and airport employees being involved in this illicit trade — knowingly or perhaps even unknowingly.

The mysterious Subject C “... also owns a legitimate seafood business in Source Country 1 that regularly exports containers of frozen seafood to Source Country 2, with the containers returning empty back to Source Country 1. He claims he can place any product in these containers and bring them safely across the border into either country. Some previous rhino horn shipments linked to this criminal network have been concealed in seafood consignments.”

This, it must be said, narrows down the list of suspects. If any reader knows someone who spent more than 10 years in the travel industry and now owns a seafood business, we don’t mean to cast aspersions. But if their lifestyle appears to conflict with what you presume to be their income, then perhaps something scaly is going on.

And there’s more, including a ruse involving “mishandled baggage”.

“Intelligence suggests that Subject C avoids shipping by air cargo because it leaves more of a paper trail. Instead, he prefers to ship by air passenger luggage, exploiting the ‘mishandled baggage’ process,” the report says.

“This refers to the process where baggage that has been separated from the passenger during transit will be forwarded by the fastest means possible to the intended destination, which can include using the services of another airline. Due to the urgency of this service, it is likely that mishandled baggage is not subject to the same scrutiny as regular baggage.”

Subject C has revealed that the costs of using this modus operandi are \$30,000 for 32kg of baggage. The report notes this is probably “the cost of the bribe needed to facilitate the removal of baggage from the plane at the transit location so it can be categorised as mishandled”.

The plot itself seems to have been mishandled along the way.

“On 27 April 2022, airport customs officers in Transit Country 1 detected the shipment and arrested a foreign national who was illegally transporting 46.12kg of rhino horn and 5.88kg of rhino teeth. The products were individually sealed in

plastic wrap and concealed in two suitcases also wrapped in plastic. The arrested suspect was a courier who had been engaged by the criminal network to move the shipment from Source Country 1 to Transit Country 1 and then Transit Country 2, from where it would be further shipped to the Destination Country,” the report says.

The caper, like the rhino horn and teeth, remained under wraps.

“This seizure was not publicly reported, and authorities in Transit Country 1 did not share information of the incident with law enforcement authorities from either Source Country 1 or Transit Country 2 (which were on connecting flight tickets). The rhino horn shipment and the arrested courier were at least temporarily held by the police authority of Transit Country 1, but it is not known if formal charges were laid or to what extent any follow-up investigation was conducted,” the report says.

Intelligence suggests that Subject C was alerted to the seizure within hours by a contact.

“The contact point sent Subject C a screenshot of the customer profile from the airline’s operating system, showing that the passenger did not board the connecting flight to Transit Country 2, and another screenshot showing that the passenger’s four bags with a total weight of 92kg were also not on the flight.”

That’s a well-placed contact, pointing to the breadth and sophistication of these networks.

In a phone call with Wildlife Justice Commission investigators a few days later, “Subject B” said the shipment may have been detected because of its weight, and that he was trying to get the luggage back from Transit Country 1 — strongly suggesting that he was resorting to bribery to achieve that goal.

And he was not cooling his heels in the face of the setback.

“Within two weeks of the seizure, the criminal network was preparing to move another rhino horn shipment from Source Country 1. Subject B said he had lost a lot of money in transit on the last shipment, but he had acquired more rhino horn and wanted to explore a new trafficking route via Transit Country 3,” the report says.

Read more in Daily Maverick: [Rhino poaching on the rise, KZN focus of carnage while private sector turns the tide](#)

One can probably take a guess at the Source and Transit countries. South Africa is the most likely candidate for Source Country 1. Transit may have been through Dubai — a hotspot for other illicit commodities such as gold — or perhaps Mozambique, while the ultimate destinations are probably China or Vietnam.

It raises as many questions as the Phala Phala scandal, and is certainly as convoluted.

“This case study demonstrates the close links between crime enabling factors and corruption risks, many of which can be addressed together with the use of standard law enforcement methodologies and targeted anti-corruption measures,” the report notes.

Recommendations

It makes a number of sensible recommendations, including follow-up investigations in Transit Country 1 and scrutiny being applied to the seafood business owned by Subject C.

The report also suggests “enquiries such as examining how the air ticket was purchased and thinking about a financial profile when questioning couriers and other suspects ... In this case, further investigation is needed to understand the potential role of the mishandled baggage service in facilitating the smuggling of illicit shipments.”

And it also says that publicly reporting such seizures is clearly in the interests of transparency.

Such recommendations make sense, but corruption runs deep. NGOs like the Wildlife Justice Commission, businesses, media outlets and other civil society actors can provide authorities with the spoor to hunt down criminals. But there needs to be political will to let the bloodhounds loose.

This makes the case both revealing and depressing. The illicit demand for rhino horn in affluent Asian markets has fuelled a poaching wave in South Africa that has seen thousands of the animals killed for their keratin over the past 15 years. The numbers have fallen sharply from the peak of 1,215 in 2014 — the known total in 2022 was 448 — but that is partly because relentless poaching has decimated the population, especially in key strongholds such as the Kruger National Park.

This is all unfolding against the backdrop of debates about the utility of lifting the global ban on rhino horn trade or maintaining it with more teeth (see [here](#) and [here](#)).

Regardless, global commercial trade remains illegal, but criminal syndicates are finding inventive ways around it as this case clearly shows. From the bullet in the bush, the trafficking chains include seafood screens and lost baggage. Small wonder the carnage continues. **DM**