



[Home](#) > [Opinion](#)

Rhino Poaching: Will it ever end?

18 September 2023, 12:32 PM |  Janet Whitton | [@SABCNews](#)



Image: Photo by Janet Whitton

There are around 26 000 rhinos left in the world. 68% of those live in South Africa. By far the majority of them are Southern White Rhinos, which are particularly vulnerable to poaching, because most of them are found in the open Savannah of national parks, making them easy targets.

There are four other remaining species of rhino. The Black Rhino, of which there are around 6000, is found in southern and east Africa. The other African species, the Northern White Rhino, is effectively extinct, as the two remaining are both female. Then there are three species found in Asia. The 41 Sumatran Rhinos left are all in Indonesia. There are 77 Javan rhinos, but the species has become extinct in Vietnam. The semi-aquatic Indian Rhino, also known as the Greater One-Horned Rhino, is a conservation success story, with numbers rising from just 50 in the mid-20th century to over 4 000 today.

Saving their habitat is crucial to the conservation of rhinos, and parks, both national and private, are key in this. But poaching is the biggest threat, and that is more prevalent in Southern Africa than anywhere else in the world. The first part of the solution is education, at both ends of the rhino poaching story.

Poachers target the poor and poorly educated to do their dirty work. Often these people are found in the areas surrounding parks, communities that frequently do not benefit from the park's existence. The poaching syndicates are also prone to using threats to get people to do their bidding, provide information, and warn them of imminent danger. And sometimes, as in the case of famed ranger Anton Zimba, they resort to murder.

The other end of the problem, the consumers, are found more often than not in Asia. In China and Vietnam in particular, rhino horn is believed to hold magical medicinal properties. Despite no proof that this is in fact the case, the horns are a status symbol many imbibe to cure anything from a hangover to cancer. Teaching that consumption is leading to the possible extinction of rhinos has had little effect – it is a remote issue and most believe the local police won't act on the laws that ban the sale and use of rhino horn.

But primarily it is about money. There's a lot of it, all the way along the chain. A live rhino costs around R350 000, but the horn goes for nearly R1.5 million per kg, and each weighs between 1 and 5 kg. And herein lies the rub. Would legalizing the trade, rather than banning it, help the rhino survive? I should be upfront here, I believe there are some things in the world that should be done just because it's the right thing to do, not for financial gain, and not just because it is 'commercially viable'. Many disagree, and it is an interesting debate.

The sale of rhino, live, dead or any of its by-products such as horn, is banned by CITES (the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species of which South Africa is a signatory). Live rhinos can be sold under strict conditions. They all fall under the highest levels of protection, where the ban on sales is regarded as necessary for the survival of the species. That ban is unlikely to be lifted anytime soon. There are those who believe that lifting the ban will give control back to the right people.

In an interview with BizNews, billionaire conservationist Jonathon Oppenheimer says commercial interest is integral to ecological sustainability. He believes the market would create value and lead to an interest in the preservation of rhinos. At the moment, he says, rhinos have no value except for eco-tourism and are expensive to protect. That's why they are now increasingly kept only in national or provincial parks, where they are more vulnerable.

John Hume recently sold his breeding farm, Platinum Rhino in the North West, and the 2 000 rhinos on it will be sold to protected areas by African Parks. He says the breeding farm has done wonders to widening the gene pool, and would have been sustainable if he had been able to sell some rhino or their horns. Rhinos can have their horns cut off safely, and they do grow back, much like your nails do.

The critics of the idea of legalizing rhino sales say the illegal horns will inevitably infiltrate the legal market, so it will have minimal effect on poaching levels. There is also a belief that the focus should be on preserving 'wild' rhino populations, and not those born and bred in semi-captivity.

Famed conservationist David Attenborough once said, "The only way to save a rhinoceros is to save the environment in which it lives because there's a mutual dependency between it and millions of other species of both animals and plants".

In other words, they help keep ecosystems balanced. But the key, in South Africa in particular, is to teach local communities that it is not a case of us or them in the fight for rhino survival. Despite my belief that it shouldn't be about commerce, local communities should definitely benefit from the parks that protect this member of the big five, an essential part of South Africa's thriving eco-tourism industry.

Share article

Tags: Rhino poaching

