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17 months' jail for man caught at Changi Airport with 11 pieces of rhinoceros horns



At least five white rhinoceroses had been killed to obtain the 11 pieces. PHOTO: NATIONAL PARKS BOARD

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SINGAPORE - A man was promised 20,000 South African rand (about S\$2,000) to unlawfully transport 11 pieces of rhinoceros horns from Johannesburg to Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, a district court heard on Wednesday (April 8).

Thurman Shiraazudin Aiden Matthews was in transit at Singapore's Changi Airport Terminal 2 in January when he was caught with the horns, which were then seized.

On Wednesday, the 45-year-old South African man was sentenced to 17 months' jail after pleading guilty to an offence under the Endangered Species (Import and Export) Act.

National Parks Board (NParks) prosecutor Wendy Tan told District Judge Adam Nakhoda that at least five white rhinoceroses had been killed to obtain the 11 pieces.

In a statement, NParks said that the 11 pieces of rhinoceros horn were estimated to be worth at least \$760,000.

She added that Matthews "did not possess any valid South African Cites (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) export permit for the 11 pieces of cut white rhino horns".

Judge Nakhoda said that according to their conservation status, white rhinoceroses are "near threatened" . Their black counterparts, however, are critically endangered.

The court heard that Matthews was in Johannesburg in October last year when he met a Chinese man who offered him an opportunity to earn some "easy money" transporting wildlife products, such as rhinoceros horns and lion bones, to Vietnam.

Matthews agreed and was introduced to two Chinese women. Details about the trio were not revealed in court documents.

Ms Tan said: "The accused... admitted having travelled to Vietnam from Johannesburg, transiting through Singapore, three times to familiarise himself with the route.



At least five white rhinoceroses had been killed to obtain the 11 pieces. PHOTO: NATIONAL PARKS BOARD

Matthews did not carry any illegal items on these trips, she said.

One of the women contacted Matthews on Dec 30 last year. He was then told that arrangements had been made for him to fly from Johannesburg on Jan 4 this year and arrive in Ho Chi Minh City the next day.

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On the departure date, Matthews collected two suitcases containing the horns, as well as some cash so that he could buy tickets for the flight back to Johannesburg two days later.

Ms Tan told Judge Nakhoda: "The arrangement was that someone would remove the two suitcases before the X-ray screening at the Ho Chi Minh airport baggage department, and the accused was to just leave the airport without picking up the suitcases."

Matthews arrived at Changi Airport Terminal 2 on Jan 5. A baggage screening officer was studying X-ray images of one of the suitcases at around 7.40am when he spotted several organic items shaped like horns.

The 11 pieces of rhinoceros horns were uncovered inside the suitcases during an examination soon after.

Defence lawyers Sunil Sudheesan and Diana Ngiam represented Matthews pro bono.

Mr Sudheesan pleaded for their client to be given less than 15 months' jail and said Matthews was a "mere courier" in the transaction.

For committing the offence under the Act, he could have been jailed for up to two years and fined.

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