STRUGGLING TO SURVIVE: THE CHALLENGES OF THE PRIVATE RHINO OWNER

Rhino conservation is a hot topic used by many NGOs to raise lots of money to 'Save the Rhino'. Unfortunately, little of this money goes to those who have rhinos on their land and urgently need the funding! Very few people really understand the formidable challenges faced by rhino owners.

Did you know that most rhinos in southern Africa roam free on private farms and reserves? NGO funding, however, is mostly channelled to government-run National Parks, with very little money reaching the private rhino owner. This leaves the private rhino owners with many challenges. Poaching for the illegal trade in rhino horn remains the main threat to the survival of the species. All reserves and game ranches with rhinos face rapidly escalating costs associated with rhino ownership. The costs of anti-poaching measures increased dramatically, without much effect on reducing the risk of poaching incidents. Severe droughts and the associated scarcity of animal feeds leads to increased feed expenses which place a further financial burden on rhino owners.

Contrary to National Parks, most private landowners must make a living off their land and animals. They thus consider the cost and risk factors of rhino ownership compared to the financial benefits that can realistically be derived. The threat posed by poachers (also physically to farmers and their workers) combined with the high costs of keeping rhinos, compares poorly to very limited returns. This has, over the past years, led to a dramatic divestment in rhino keeping by private landowners. The knock-on effect is a significant drop in the market value of rhinos, spurring a viscous cycle of accelerated divestment. The often-overlooked consequence of all this is the resulting significant decline in available habitat for rhinos. Habitat decline is a leading cause of biodiversity loss and species extinction!

This article provides an overview of the challenges surrounding rhino conservation. We start by discussing the drivers fuelling the illegal trade in rhino horn. This is followed by a discussion on anti-poaching measures implemented and an overview of current poaching statistics. We will also highlight the crucial role private rhino owners play in rhino conservation efforts. Finally, we touch on the thorny issue of the legal trade in rhino horn, where we provide rational arguments in favour of the legalised horn trade. We hope for an open discussion on this issue with readers who are pro- and anti-trade.

Cow and calf in the sunset © U. Tubbesing

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What is rhino horn, and for what is it used?

Rhino horn consists of keratin (cornified epidermis or compressed hair) and can be compared to a human fingernail or, more closely, to a horse's hoof. Just like the fingernail, horn grows continuously throughout a rhino's life. The horn does not have any medicinal value.

Rhinos use their horns for several behavioural functions, for example in foraging behaviour, and as a weapon to defend themselves and their calves, whilst males will use it in territorial fights with other bulls.

This rhino bull was translocated from Namibia to the DRC. As you could read, keratin is basically compressed hair. Within 5 months of a more moisture-rich environment, this bull developed a nice 'hair patch' on his horn. This clearly demonstrates that the horn consists of 'hair'. © M. Bijsterbosch

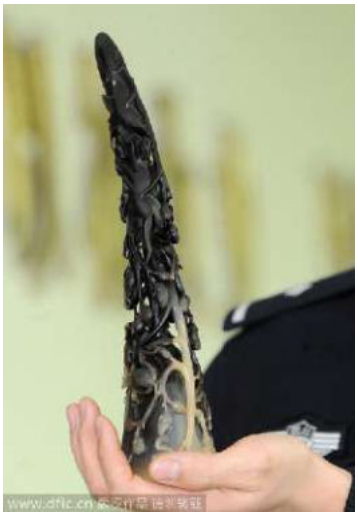
It is scientifically proven that rhino horn has no medicinal value.

The biggest market for rhino horn is in the Asian countries, led by China and Vietnam. Rhino horn has, for thousands of years, been used in traditional eastern medicine where it is believed to have a range of curative properties against fever, rheumatism, gout, stroke, and even as a hangover relief. Although originally not recognised as such in the Traditional Chinese Medicine, rhino horn is marketed in Vietnam to cure impotence and to enhance sexual performance. Rhino horn is also used to honour terminally ill relatives.

A significant, yet often overlooked market segment is the use of rhino horn in the art and antique markets in Asia. Artefacts like jewellery, goblets etc. carved from rhino horn have a huge status value and are used as a gift to obtain favours and influence. If you can offer wine to your business associates in a rhino horn cup, you are a big shot! Another traditional market, although not very big anymore, is Yemen. Here, rhino horn is carved into traditional daggers, also called jambiya.

A variety of 'medicines' that contain small amounts of rhino horn. © WWF

These bowls made from rhino horn were confiscated from a Chinese actress in 2013. © ChinaDaily



Ornamental carving made from rhino horn © ChinaDaily

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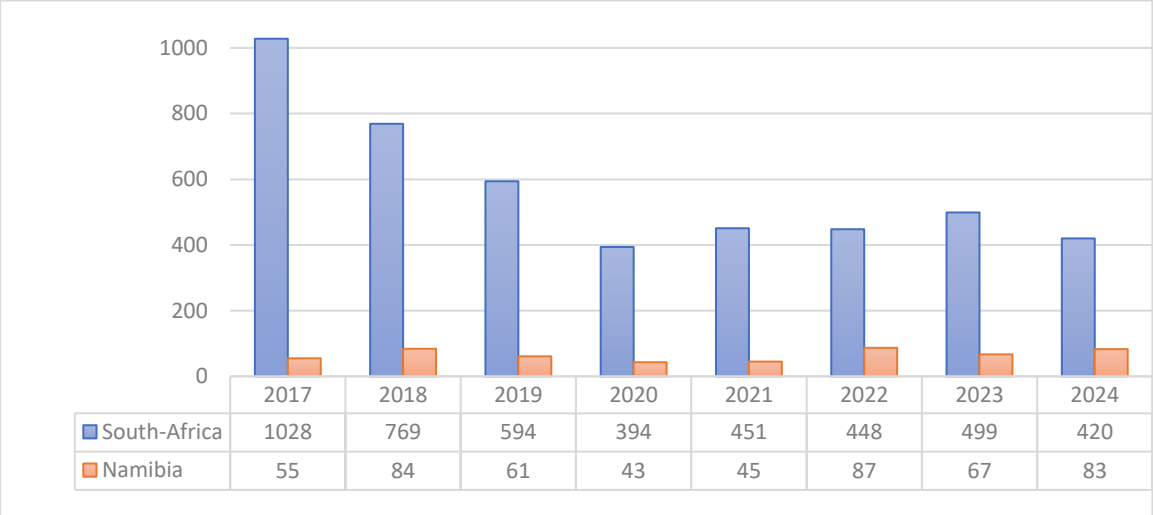
Rhino poaching statistics

Rhino cows are considered slow breeders because they have a long gestation period of 15-16 months, and produce only one calf every 3-4 years. This hampers population growth and recovery. On top of that, excessive losses caused by poaching take a heavy toll on our rhinos. Despite global efforts to protect rhinos, the illegal poaching for their horns continues to devastate rhino populations. Each rhino that is killed for their horn, decreases the already dwindling rhino population.

The graph below demonstrates the annual number of poached rhinos in South-Africa and Namibia between 2017 and 2024. These numbers are likely an underestimation, as proper data is sometimes lacking, and not all carcasses of poached rhinos are found due to efforts by poachers to hide them under cut branches and the vastness of the countries.



	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
South-Africa	1028	769	594	394	451	448	499	420
Namibia	55	84	61	43	45	87	67	83

The official number of rhinos poached in Namibia and South-Africa between 2017 and 2024. Actual numbers might even be higher. These numbers were retrieved from: Stop Rhino Poaching, 2024; Reuters, 2025; Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism, 2023; Steynberg, 2024; Namibia Daily News, 2025

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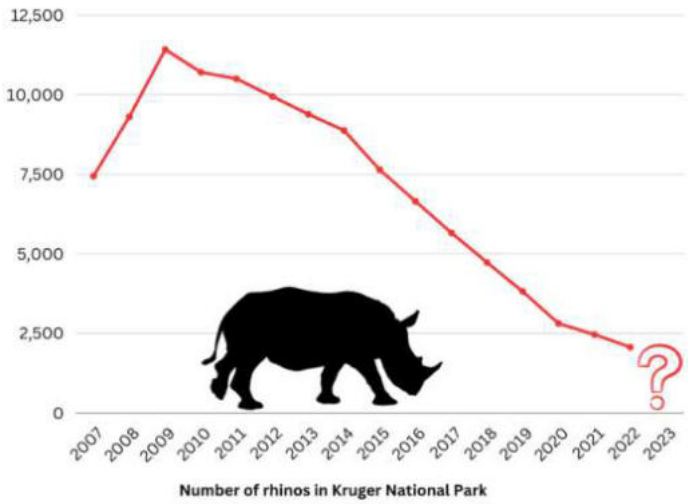
In their 2022/2023 annual report, SANPARKS proudly stated a 49.74% decrease in rhino poaching. Has the war on poaching been won? Hardly! These statistics need to be put into perspective. Let us look at the statistics of the rhino population in the Kruger National Park (KNP):

2007: 7,000 white and 440 black rhinos

2022: 1,851 white and 210 black rhinos

While the SANPARKS statistics show a decrease in poaching incidents, it does not indicate a success in the war on poaching. Instead, it highlights the tragic fact that there are simply fewer rhinos to poach!

From 2013 to the end of 2022, the KNP rhino population decreased by 78%. This means the pool of potential targets has drastically diminished, despite significant efforts to curb poaching.



The clear downward trend of the number of rhinos inside Kruger National Park from 2007 to 2022 © Klarmann (2023)

Even though we are not far into 2025, by mid-February, already 35 rhinos have been poached in Kruger National Park.

Namibia is also hit hard by poaching. By the end of October 2024, 46 rhinos; 35 black and 11 white rhinos have been poached inside Etosha National Park. Nationwide, the number of poached rhinos in 2024 is 83. This is not far from our 2022 'record'...

Is it bad if rhinos become extinct?

Rhinos are mega-herbivores who shape the landscape by maintaining grasslands, dispersing seeds and creating paths for smaller animals. They form an essential part of their ecosystems. The loss of rhinos will reduce the overall biodiversity where each species plays an important role to play in the environment. The loss of one, can have cascading effects on other species.

Tourists visit Africa to experience wide open spaces where iconic species like elephants, lions, rhinos etc. roam free. Losing the rhino will have a major economic impact, as rhinos are a major draw for tourists. What is better than sitting at a waterhole, watching all sorts of game drink, and then the majestic rhino passes by?

Should the rhino become extinct, it would be a human-induced extinction. It is our moral responsibility to prevent this!

Rhinos are a so-called umbrella species. If we conserve rhinos, many other species in the same ecosystem also benefit. © M. Bijsterbosch

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How to protect our rhinos?

Prospects for the survival of the rhino as a species is grim! How do we protect them?

Anti-poaching and technologies

Armed and trained Anti-Poaching Units (APU) form the central pillar of rhino protection. Anti-poaching patrolling involves ground teams with specialised trackers and dogs, as well as aerial surveys using drones and even helicopters, planes and gyrocopters. Different technologies and applications have become quite prominent in nature conservation. Think of the use of drones, surveillance camera systems, trail cameras as well as telemetry systems such as horn implants, foot collars and ear tags that allow rhino owners to follow the rhino's movement 24/7. These direct anti-poaching efforts contribute towards rhino protection, BUT they come at a huge cost to the private rhino owner. Their effectiveness is curtailed by:

- Affordability, where the private rhino owner gets no financial support.
- Financial incentives offered by poaching kingpins motivates APU and/or farm employees to become proactively involved in the poaching, by acting as informants, guides to poachers or, in some cases even doing the poaching themselves. In 95% of poaching incidents insider collaboration is eventually proven.

Demand reducing strategies and education

Several ongoing programs in Asia aim to reduce the local demand in rhino horn. These strategies employing education and consumer behaviour modification may be effective in the long run, but do we have that time? How on earth can we hope to, within the few years left for rhinos, achieve to break believes and traditions that are thousands of years old? China, one of the main markets for rhino horn products, is a country with omnipresent digital surveillance. Surely, if China was in the least bit interested in curbing it's thriving (illegal?) national trade in rhino horn products, this should be easily attainable?

Dehorning

Namibia has been the first country to dehorn their rhinos to protect them from poaching. Between 1989 and 1990 dehorning, together with more strict security measures, led to a decline in poaching, with not a single dehorned rhino being poached. However, dehorning comes with limitations.

The stub of horn that remains after a rhino was dehorned, can be a sufficient to still have a rhino poached.

For a dehorning operation one needs a veterinarian, a helicopter, a ground team, equipment, vehicles, rangers or anti-poaching teams, the presence of CITES officials etc. etc. This is a big and very expensive operation for which the private rhino owners usually must pay themselves.

While we support the practice of dehorning, it remains a sad task. It's disheartening to see such a majestic creature stripped of its iconic horn – and for what? © M. Bijsterbosch

The rhino owner (and thus also legal owner of the removed horn) may not use or sell the harvested rhino horn, but is legally responsible for its safe keeping. This is usually done by storing them in a bank vault – more expenses without any returns!

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The impact of dehorning on rhino behaviour remains under-researched, and there is no conclusive evidence regarding its effects on behaviour, or their ability to protect themselves and their calves. Nevertheless, we believe that the benefits of dehorning outweigh its drawbacks. We strongly recommend dehorning the entire population to ensure that rhinos without horns are not placed at a disadvantage compared to those that retain their horns.

It is important to note that rhino horn grows at an average rate of 5-6 cm per year (front horn) and 2 cm per year (back horn) throughout the life of a rhino. To be an effective anti-poaching measure rhinos should be dehorned every second year. The dehorning process is painless and seems to have minimal effects on the rhinos.

Chemicals and dyes in rhino horn

Several attempts have been made to make rhino horn less attractive to consumers by putting something into the horn.

This fake photo, together with an elephant with pink tusks, went viral a few years back. It was digitally altered. © Africa Check

In the Rhino Rescue Project, rhino horn is infused with ectoparasiticides and indelible dye. If people ingest some of this horn, they would become nauseous, vomit and develop a diarrhoea. At the same time, the dye will discolour the horn, making it visually less appealing and potentially more detectable by X-ray scanners. Although it might seem like a good option to scare the end-user (consumer), research has shown that the chemicals do not spread all the way through the rhino horn.

The Rhisotope Project inserts radioactive chips into the horns, with the aim of making the horn more detectable at border posts. The effectiveness of this procedure is very questionable, since syndicates involved with the illegal trade of rhino horn have well established smuggling routes which often avoid official border crossings.

For both these projects, rhinos would need to be immobilised every few years, thus not a cost-saving method compared to dehorning. Contrary to dehorning, the rhino is left with its horn, making it more attractive to the poacher.

Law enforcement

Then, lastly, more effective law enforcement measures should help to protect the rhino. In 2017 Namibia increased fines for rhino poaching to N$ 25 million (+/- USD 1,350,000) and a maximum prison term of 25 years. Sounds great, but between January 2017 and October 2024, Namibia lost 518 rhinos, and there has not been a single case that we know of where these sentences were applied. On the contrary, very few poachers are apprehended and those that are, even repeat offenders, are usually released on minimal bail within days after apprehension.

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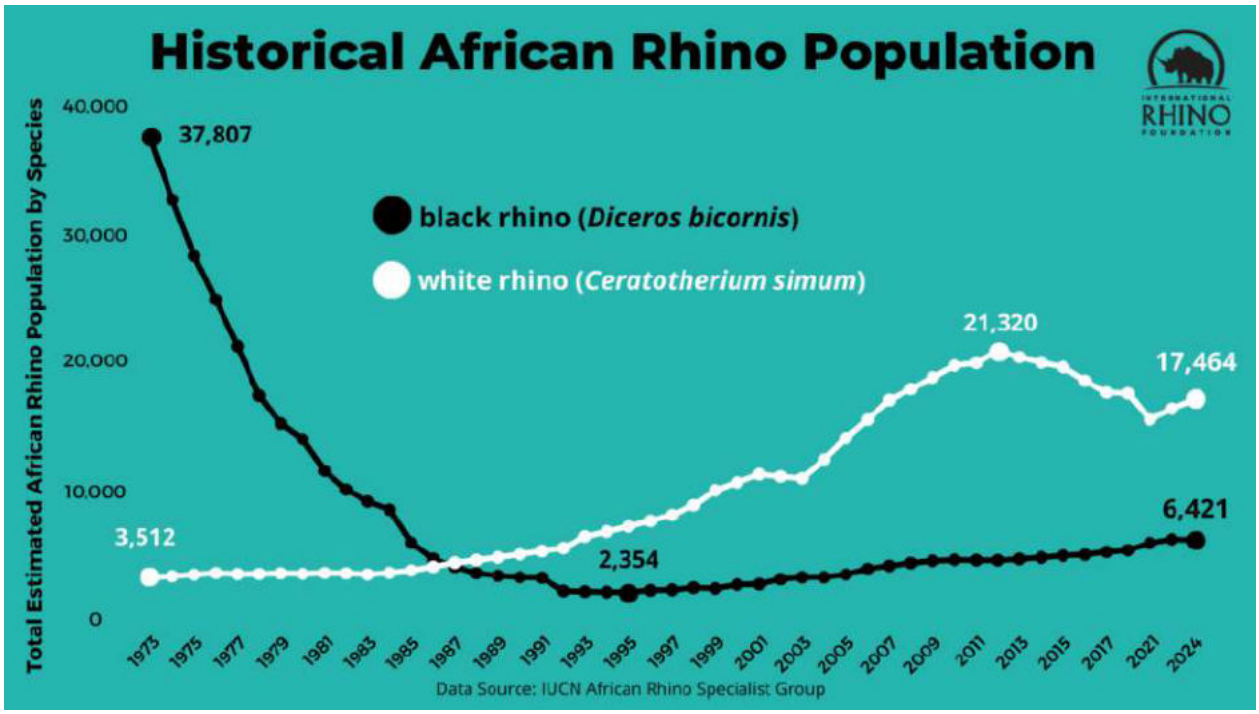
Rhino population statistics and the role of private rhino owners

When we look at rhino population statistics, there seems to be some reason for cautious optimism. The grow in rhino numbers that you see in the figure below is largely due to private owners.

In South Africa, the proportion of white rhinos on private land compared to National Parks rose from 25% in 2010 to 53% in 2021, which means that private owners in South-Africa now hold the largest number of white rhinos within Africa. In Namibia, about 75% of Namibia's white rhinos are privately owned. In Zimbabwe, 88% of the black rhino population, and 76% of the white rhino population was found on private land in 2018.



This graph shows the estimated numbers of black and white rhinos between 1973 and 2024 on the African continent. Numbers are based on estimates from the IUCN African Rhino Specialist Group © International Rhino Foundation

The large role that private rhino owners play in rhino conservation cannot be denied, especially now that we know the alarming impact of poaching on populations in National Parks as well as private land. At the same time, there is a worrying trend. While poaching remains the biggest threat, the second serious threat is that private rhino owners are forced to sell, or disinvest in their rhinos.

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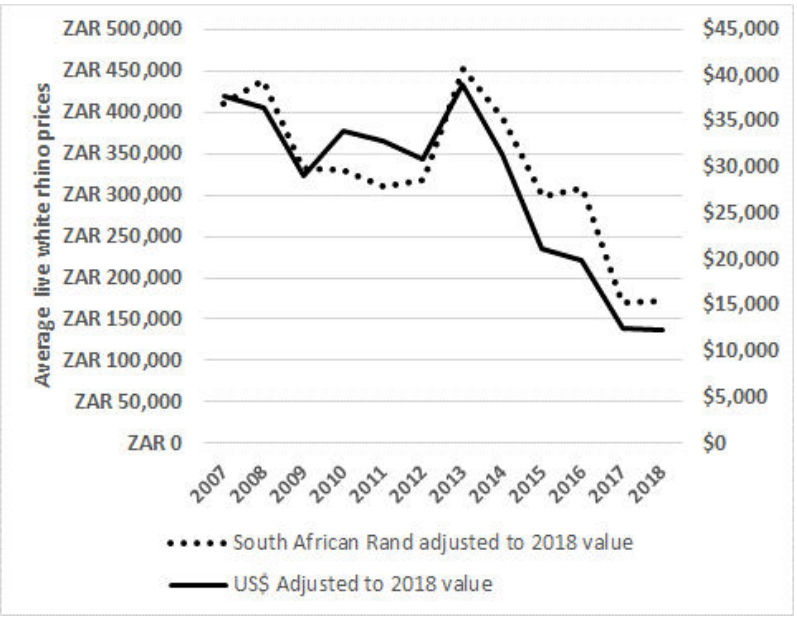
To keep rhinos safe from poachers, a private rhino owner needs to invest in anti-poaching units (APU), and sometimes even high-tech technology (e.g. cameras, drones etc). In 2017 an average farm in South-Africa would spend around ZAR 1.5 million (+/- US$ 80,800) per year to protect their rhinos. In 2021, this figure rose to an average of ZAR 2.2 million (+/- US$ 118,500) per farm per year!

Added to the security costs, the private rhino owner also has maintenance costs (labour, vehicle maintenance, fence repairs etc.), and costs for supplemental food. Namibia is just recovering from a crippling drought. This means that natural grazing was (very) limited or absent, and supplemental food is expensive. Early 2025, a 20 kg bale of lucerne (alfalfa) was around N$ 220.00 (+/- US$ 12.00), if one was lucky enough to get some! Grass was even more scarce!

In the dry season, an average sized white rhino will consume grass of around 2% of its body mass, which translates to roughly 2 grass bales a day.

Supplemental food in Namibia is hard to come by and very expensive. © M. Bijsterbosch



The average prices of live white rhinos between 2007 and 2018, adjusted for inflation, and expressed in both South African Rand and United States Dollar © Emslie et al (2019)

In South-Africa, divestment in rhino has led to a loss of > 400,000 hectares of rhino habitat.

While costs to maintain rhinos are increasing tremendously, the price of white rhinos that were sold on auctions in South-Africa have dropped by 75% in 2020, when compared to prices in 2007.

This decline in the market value of live rhino is supply and demand driven. In 2018 it was estimated that 28% of the private rhino owners in South-Africa sold part or even all of their rhinos. Less farmers are willing to take on the risks associated with keeping rhinos, resulting in a downward spiral in the value of live rhinos.

Since game farmers must make a living off their land, they must manage their operation based on sound financial principles. For a great number of game farmers this also means avoiding expensive, high risk, low revenue species like the rhino.

The resulting dramatic divestment from rhino farming has, over the past few years, resulted in a decline of 400,000 ha of rhino habitat on private land in South Africa. We are seeing the same negative trend in Namibia, where game farmers try to sell part, or even their entire rhino population.

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Rhinos grazing in the Namibian sunset. © M. Bijsterbosch

To trade, or not to trade? That is the question!

The traditional trade in rhino horn between Africa and Asia actually dates back almost 2,000 years. As rhino poaching escalated in the 1960s to 1970s, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) placed an international ban on the trade in rhino horn in 1977. This initially resulted in a decrease in rhino poaching, which was likely more due to the simultaneously increased anti-poaching efforts by rhino owners than the actual ban. At the same time, there was a sharp increase in consumer prices for horn on the Asian markets, whereby the price in Taiwan increased from USD 17.00 per kg in 1977, to USD 477.00 in 1980.

However, as was discussed earlier in this article, rhino poaching increased following the turn of this century and continues at a staggering rate. The question therefore is, how successful is this international ban on rhino horn trade?

Another important fact to mention is that there are currently vast stockpiles of rhino horn all over the world. These stockpiles are kept by national governments, zoos, safari parks and private owners. The bulk of rhino horn stockpiles are derived from natural mortalities, management actions (horns recovered from dehorning practises, horns broken off etc.), trophy hunting, pre-CITES (horn acquired before 1977, before CITES became into force) and confiscations. After obtaining the required permit, a rhino owner is allowed to keep the horn but is also responsible for its safe keeping. The owner is not allowed to sell or trade the horn.

The South-African Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment High Level Panel Report of 2020 reported a government rhino horn stockpile of 27,641kg, and a private stockpile of 47,544kg – a total of 75,185kg in South-Africa alone. Some people argue these stockpiles should be burnt, to show that horn (and ivory) is worthless. This is obviously a nonsensical argument in a situation where financial constraints and loss of habitat are the main limiting factor in rhino conservation.

Why not put these rhino horns on a strictly controlled market? Rhino horn is estimated to fetch between USD 20,000 to 60,000 per kg on the black market. Even at the lower estimate, this translates into a lot of money that would help rhino conservation efforts considerably!

Fact is that a trade ban will never end a trade, it just pushes it underground. The demand for rhino horn in Asia persists, despite all the educational programs. At the same time, rhino owners do everything in their power to protect their rhinos, and still rhinos get poached. The rhino currently holds no economic incentives for a farmer... on the contrary, it is a very high risk species that costs a lot of money to keep.

A rhino is worth more dead than alive!

Let the above sentence sink in for a while. This is actually crazy when you think about it?

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After years of feeding and protecting a rhino, the owner will be lucky if he/she can sell the rhino for more than NAD 300,000.00 (USD 16,150.00). After deduction of expenses, the return on investment is likely to be zero. On the other hand, a 5 kg rhino horn from a poached rhino trading at say USD 60,000.00 per kg will earn the trader a cool USD 300,000.00 in income, with very limited risks and expenses.

The above is clear proof that the ban on legal trade financially punishes those who invest heavily in rhino conservation, while it handsomely rewards organised crime? Does this make sense? Bold measures are needed!

The fact that rhinos are worth more dead than alive needs to be turned around and fast! Some of the arguments for the legal trade in rhino horn are:

- By introducing stockpiled rhino horn onto a strictly regulated legal market, the current imbalance in demand and supply in rhino horn on the Asian markets will be settled. This will reduce the price for horn and thus decrease the incentive to poach rhinos.
- Why would current illegal operators take the risk to poach rhinos and smuggle the horn if the product is available legally and likely cheaper?
- The legal trade will generate funds for rhino conservation efforts. This will enable farmers to enhance their ability to protect the rhinos, better maintain their farms, and even expand the land.
- The rhino will instantly change from a liability to an asset. Its live market value will dramatically increase and previous rhino owners will reinvest in rhinos. This will not only increase the available rhino habitat, but also boost rhino populations.
- Rhino horn can be humanely and sustainable harvested throughout a rhino's life. If it pays, it stays!

People opposing the legal trade argue that they believe the trade will increase the demand of rhino horn, and that there are not enough rhinos to supply for this demand. Let's make a simple calculation:

Rhino horn grows on average at around 1 to 1.5 kg per year. If we harvest this much from 20,000 rhinos, it will bring 20,000 to 30,000 kg on the market.

In 2017, 1,000 rhinos were poached in South Africa. Assuming an average weight of 5 kg per horn, this amounts to a total of 5,000 kg of rhino horn, which falls significantly short of what could be sustainably supplied through legal means!

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Needless to say, it is very important that a legal trade must be highly regulated to prevent corruption and illegality. This is done quite successfully with diamonds, why not with rhino horn?

Since the rhino horn is a good source of DNA from the rhino, traceability is entirely possible. The first time we work on a specific rhino, we always collect biological samples for the Rhino DNA Index System (RhODIS) database. Each rhino horn can thus be individually identified and traced back to the individual rhino and farm of origin.

The controlled, legalised trade in rhino horn may not prevent all poaching, but it should greatly reduce poaching and, at the same time make the living rhino worth more than its horn. Rhino owners will, at last be rewarded for their contribution towards rhino conservation.

When we first work with rhinos, we collect tissue, hair and blood. These samples are a good source of DNA, and are sent to the RhODIS DNA database. After analysing the samples, they are stored and entered into the system. The rhino's owner then receives a certificate. © U. Tubbesing

Other examples where the legal trade in animal products saved the species

People often compare the rhino horn trade with the ivory trade. In 1999 and 2008 South-Africa, Namibia, Botswana and Zimbabwe held two once-off ivory sales. This move was supposed to relieve the poaching pressure. However, after the 2008 sale there was an increase of approx. 71% in ivory being smuggled out of Africa. Researchers suggested that this was due to an increasing demand by consumers, and reduced costs of supplying the black market. BUT... one must compare apples to apples!

Rhino horn grows throughout a rhino's life and regrows after it has been trimmed, without negatively affecting the animal. Rhino horn can thus be sustainably and humanely harvested, where ivory on the other hand, can only be collected once an elephant is dead.

Vicuna in the Peruvian highlands © A. Pinto / Shutterstock.com

It makes more sense to compare the rhino to the vicuña!

The vicuña (*Vicugna vicugna*) is a small camelid species, native to the Andes regions of South-America. The population plummeted from over 2 million individuals during the pre-colonial times, to 400,000 individuals in the 50's, to around 10,000 in 1967. The vicuña was on the brink of extinction! In 1969, a 10-year ban on hunting and the selling of vicuñas was put in place by Bolivia and Peru. This did not provide the local communities with an incentive to protect the vicuña. On the contrary, they competed with livestock for grazing. In 1979 the ban was lifted, and in 1980 the government of Peru granted local communities the right to shear and sell the vicuña fibre. This gave the communities a financial incentive to protect and manage the vicuña populations. The number of vicuñas is currently estimated at +/- 500,000 individuals. As the South-Americans say, "a sheared vicuña is a saved vicuña"!

Other examples are the sustainable harvesting of saltwater crocodiles in Australia, which led to a steady increase of the populations. Community-managed harvest and trade lead to the widespread and rapid recoveries of the pirarucu (a fresh water fish) in Brazil, ranching programs of Nile crocodiles in Kenya reduced poisoning of the local crocodile populations, and community-based management and associated trophy hunting has led to increased populations of ibex and markhor in Tajikistan.

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Conclusion

Although long, we hope that this article has provided you with valuable insights into the struggles faced by rhino owners and the reasoning behind calls for the legalization of the rhino horn trade.

Since the ban on rhino horn trade was implemented in 1977, thousands of rhinos have been poached. Most of our African rhinos are on private lands, yet private rhino owners rarely benefit from the funds collected by numerous NGOs dedicated to saving these animals. These private owners are responsible for ensuring the safety of the rhinos, providing food, and maintaining their land, all without significant financial return. While poaching remains the primary issue, a critical but often overlooked problem is the rapidly growing disinvestment in rhinos.

If there is no incentive to keep rhinos, what will happen to them?
If there is no habitat left, where will the rhino go?

Rhino horn is more valuable than gold, making a live rhino worth less than a dead one. Those involved in poaching are not impoverished individuals; they are part of organized criminal syndicates that do not hesitate to use violence, even against people.

The ban on rhino horn trade, the implementation of specialized technology and APUs, dehorning practices, the infusion of horns with radioactive material or chemicals, as well as extensive educational programs in Asia, nothing has proven to be effective to stop poaching. This leaves the legalised and controlled trade in rhino horn as our last viable option!

The primary opposition against the trade comes from animal welfare and rights organizations, mostly based in Europe or the USA. These people often lack a full understanding of the situation in Africa and, more importantly, they have none of their own hard-earned money invested in keeping rhinos alive. They just do not understand the harsh reality on the ground. These organizations have significant influence in CITES. Attempts made by African countries with substantial rhino populations to legalize the horn trade fail because of these organisations using their influence and money to literally buy veto votes against the trade.

The persisting demand in rhino horn is a reality, whether we like it or not. However, there are vast stockpiles of rhino horns that could be used to supply and even flood the market, resulting in a decrease in price. In addition, rhino horn can be sustainably harvested to provide for future demands in rhino horn. Acquiring legal rhino horn would become easier and would make poaching less attractive.

Legalizing the rhino horn trade would increase the value of live rhinos, once again making them worth more alive than dead. Money that comes from selling the horns would be reinvested in rhino conservation. Private rhino owners would afford better protection, potentially expand their land, and increase their rhino populations.

Poaching may never be entirely eradicated, but with legal trade, rhino owners would at least have a financial incentive to keep their rhinos. It is high time for action.

Please share this article, spread information, and keep the discussion going. We certainly do not profess to have all the answers to this complex crisis. If you personally are against the legalised trade in rhino horn, we would love to hear from you. Please provide us with workable (financially and practically executable) alternatives that have a realistic chance of eliminating poaching within the next few years.

The challenges of private rhino owners and the failure of current anti-poaching measures shows the importance of trying a bold measure: legalize the rhino horn trade. © M. Bijsterbosch

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