

Court Cases Reveal Pipeline of Illegal Rhino Horn Shipments to China



South African scientists inject radioactive material into a sedated rhino's horn so it can be tracked if someone tries to smuggle it past a border post. AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Southern Africa remains a significant source of rhino horn entering Chinese markets, despite an overall downturn in rhino poaching on the continent in recent years.

A March 2026 report by the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) analyzed 258 Chinese court cases involving rhino horn trafficking that were uploaded to China Judgements Online between 2013 and October 2025. However, that total doesn't represent all the rhino horn trafficking cases.

Of the cases studied, Mozambique and South Africa represent the most prevalent African source and transit countries for rhino horn. "Court verdicts from 2013 to 2025 reveal that rhino horn enters and is transported throughout China via a complex network of international and domestic routes connecting Africa, Southeast Asia, and major Chinese markets," the report states.

Rhino horn can be sold for as much as \$20,000 per kilogram on the black market. Horns can weigh as much as 3 kilograms. They are commonly used in traditional Chinese medicine, although they do not effectively treat any malady. Their composition is similar to that of human hair and fingernails.

Traditional medicinal product uses were not reported in the cases studied, and powdered horn seizures were minimal, the report states. This could be due to low demand for medicinal products or because some horn scraps were ground into powder for other uses after reaching buyers.

Almost all seized horn products came from African species, according to judgments in which that information was disclosed. White rhino horn was named in 91 cases and black rhino horn in 25. Another case involved the greater one-horned rhino. Most of the seized horn had been formed into other products, including pendants, bracelets, cups, beads and libation bowls. Full horns and powders represented 14 and 18 seizures, respectively.

Horns originating in Eswatini and Mozambique move into South Africa before traveling directly to China or, at times, to a Mideast transit nation such as Qatar or the United Arab Emirates. Some Mozambican horns travel through Kenya, which is listed as a transit country, before making their way to China.

"Twenty-two cases document shipments of rhino horn entering China with an African country specifically identified as the exporting country and account for the highest-volume consignments recorded in the dataset," according to the report. "These cases all occurred between 2013 and 2019 and include South Africa, Mozambique, and Eswatini as the exporting countries." Eswatini was listed in only one case.

South Africa saw a 16% decrease in rhino poaching in 2025, according to a Reuters report. Poachers killed 352 rhinos, down from 420 in 2024 and 499 in 2023. Despite that overall drop, the number of rhinos killed in the nation's Kruger National Park rose sharply, from 88 in 2024 to 175 in 2025.

Over time, poaching has endangered three of the five living rhino species, according to Mongabay, a nature news website. About 500,000 rhinos are thought to have lived in the wild at the start of the 20th century, according to the International Rhino Foundation. Now fewer than 27,000 remain. A rhino is killed every 15 hours.

A 2022 report by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) makes clear that rhino horn trafficking is more than just an environmental tragedy. It is a genuine security threat enmeshed with international organized criminal networks that also deal in ivory, heroin and more.

"Seizure data indicate there could also be crime convergence with firearms, illicit drugs, and other commodities in approximately 10% of cases," the CITES report states. "Further information and intelligence analysis are required to understand the nature and scope of this threat."

CITES calls on source, transit and destination countries "to step up and redirect their efforts to ensure crime is confronted in an effective, coordinated, and enduring manner."

Susan Lieberman, vice president of international policy at the nonprofit Wildlife Conservation Society, told Mongabay that the EIA report provides insights into the trafficking in China. "Analysis of court cases can assist in understanding trafficking routes and patterns and the outcomes of criminal cases," she said. "It is, however, the 'tip of the iceberg,' and is dependent on enforcement efforts and the nature of cases that actually go to court."

