

10 Minutes for the Planet

Rhino horn and the medicinal myth ©

by Sarah Heath



Hello! I'm Sarah Heath and you're listening to 10 Minutes for the Planet on EnglishWaves.

The words 'endangered species' will often evoke an image of the distinctive outline of a rhinoceros and its prominent, but sadly much-coveted, horn. The second-largest land mammal on the planet, rhinos have been in existence for over 40 million years but since the turn of the 19th century, total populations have dropped from the one million mark to just 28,000 animals living in the wild.

All of the five species of rhino worldwide are relentlessly targeted by unscrupulous dealers to the point where there is a strong chance that, due to this poaching, rhinos may well become extinct within our lifetime. The International Union of Conservation of Nature has placed three of the five rhino species on the critically endangered list, meaning that there is a strong likelihood that the animal will become extinct in the near future. Today, there are around 20,000 African White Rhino, 5,000 Black Rhino, and a combined total of around 3,000 of the three Asian species, the Indian, the Javan and the Sumatran Rhino.

Poaching is far and away the biggest threat to the survival of rhinos. Even an animal which can weigh well over 3,000 kilograms, such as the African White Rhino, cannot withstand a bullet from a poacher's rifle. Earlier this year, the South African Department of Environmental Affairs revealed that the official total of poached rhino for the year 2018 was 769, an average of over two per day. The only positive is that it was 259 fewer than the previous year. These numbers can be better comprehended in the knowledge that there are around 20 poaching gangs working in the Kruger National Park in South Africa every single day.

So what is the irresistible and dangerous pull for poachers to kill such an unthreatening and beautiful creature? The unsurprising but tragic answer is, of course, money. Rhino horn is today worth in the region of €25,000 a kilogram. Five years ago, it reached €50,000 per kilogram. Such huge sums make it worthwhile, despite the dangers involved in the killing of the rhino but also despite the increasingly harsh prison sentences being handed down to those caught poaching. Unsurprisingly, dealers believe the profit outweighs the risk particularly as wild rhino horn is preferred over farmed.

This year, customs police in Hong Kong arrested two men attempting to smuggle 24 rhino horn through the airport. The horns weighed 40kg and were destined for the world's biggest consumer market of rhino horn – Vietnam. The street value for such a haul? €900,000.

The demand for rhino horn in Asia is based on the grossly mistaken belief that it has powerful medicinal benefits. Usually in powdered form, consumers take it to combat gout, nausea and inflammation among other mild ailments although it has also been marketed as an anti-cancer medicine. All of these claims are entirely false as has repeatedly been backed up by scientific evidence. Rhino horn is made from keratin – the same protein which makes up fingernails, hair and animal hooves. But practitioners of Chinese medicine are still absolutely convinced of its necessity as a pharmaceutical product.

The reasons for taking rhino horn as a supplement have become more complicated however, as the market now leans towards the emotional benefits it allegedly provides. This is mostly as a status symbol within Asian countries with new-found wealth to shamelessly display to their peers. Its use is now considered a sign of success among the educated elite not just as a frivolous magic potion by poorer, less-informed people. The wildlife trade monitor, TRAFFIC, suggests that rhino horn is now seen as an investment, much as an antique or piece of art, and the trafficking of it is extremely well-organised by criminal syndicates.

And Vietnam is where the growth of rhino horn sales has exploded in the past 15 years. There is little stigma over the provenance of the rhino horn among Vietnamese consumers, 69% of whom believed in the myth of its medicinal benefits when polled in 2014. With the help of celebrities such as Jackie Chan, campaigns to swing opinion have been gradually changing long-held beliefs: most recent polls show just 23% now believe rhino horn works medicinally. And the price of rhino horn has consequently fallen to just half the price of gold and slightly under the price for cocaine.

Charities such as Save the Rhino, WildAid, the Frankfurt Zoological Society and the World Wildlife Fund work tirelessly to protect rhinos on every level. Education and anti-poaching marketing campaigns; training rangers to protect rhino in the wild and managing breeding and re-introduction programmes. But it is an uphill battle.

To give a perspective of the speed in which rhinos are disappearing, 59-year-old Mark Cawardine, an environmentalist and wildlife expert explained, "The scary thing is that within my lifetime, 95% of the world's rhinos have been killed".

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