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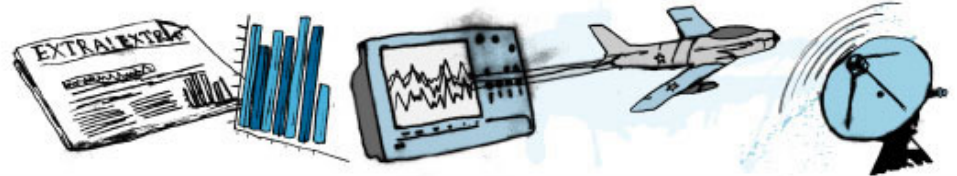
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South African rhinos pay the price of new cancer myths

18:00 17 November 2010

Life

Shaoni Bhattacharya, contributor

The rhino is in deep trouble, there's no doubt about it. While researching "[Gene detectives track the rhino killers](#)", this week's lead news story on a rhino DNA database to help law enforcers catch poachers, I learned of a disturbing, macabre tale. I found out how the rhino has suddenly been shunted back to the edge of existence by criminal gangs preying on the desperate hopes of ordinary people.

Things had generally stabilised for Africa's rhinoceroses in the 1990s. The [rhino horn market](#) - once prized as traditional dagger handles for Yemeni men coming of age and a traditional Chinese treatment for fever - was dwindling. Some populations had even begun to bounce back as a result of legislation, education and the enforcement of trade bans by individual countries

like China and international agreements like [CITES](#) (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora).

Then, in 2005, things took an unexpected and sinister turn.



(Image: Desmond Kwande/AFP/Getty Images)

"A belief began to emerge in Vietnam that if you were suffering from cancer and took a dose of crushed rhino horn in a liquid it would halt the progress of the disease," John Sellar, the chief enforcement officer for CITES, told me.

The belief spread "like wildfire" he says, and coincided with increasing affluence in Vietnam. A new market for rhino horn emerged.

The Vietnamese demand hit South Africa - one of the few countries that still had a healthy rhino population. A bizarre situation developed where Vietnamese citizens suddenly began to visit

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South Africa to go on hunts, which, thanks to its large rhino population, were legal. Horns were allowed to be taken as trophies, to be mounted upon walls. In the midst of this, says Sellar, some professional hunters began to notice that people in their groups had no idea how to handle a rifle.

Horns were taken back to Vietnam with genuine CITES documentation, where they fed into the black market.

Sellar adds that some professional hunters in South Africa "behaved abominably". "Some simply saw it as the goose that laid golden eggs, and fees for rhino hunting went up," he says. This tipped off authorities. Seeing that people with ordinary paid jobs in Vietnam could afford these inflated prices, they realised that organised crime networks were involved.

In response, South Africa considerably tightened up its legal hunting, and that's when the poaching stepped up. Poaching of rhinos in South Africa has escalated in the last 18 months, says Sellar, with one rhino killed there every 30 hours.

Cindy Harper, head of veterinary genetics at the faculty of veterinary science at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, who heads up the South African part of the new rhino database, told me last week that the very latest figures show 232 rhinos have been illegally killed in the country this year, and of these 114 are from Kruger National Park.

From being in a relatively stable place, South Africa's rhinos are now in an unsustainable situation if poaching continues, says Sellar.

It is a sorry tale all round. Not just for the rhinos, but for those suffering from cancer. "What is so heinous about these crimes is that organised criminal groups are exploiting people and their relatives when they are at the weakest in their lives," adds Sellar.



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