



# To legalise rhino horn or not?

## AGAINST...

**R**HINO conservation is top of the list when discussing conservation issues with lay animal lovers. And in many of the discussions I have heard the comment, “if trade solves the problem then they should sell the horn”, along with the view that flooding the market would end all our rhino-poaching problems.

Conservationists are often under enormous pressure to solve overwhelming issues in a short time – and the rhino issue is no different. This creates the dangerous situation where any solution is better than none, and leads to a “solution” that is more destructive than the problem. The assumptions presented to make trade the only option are lacking robust scientific support.

The first of these is that we understand the Chinese and Vietnamese markets. The number of Chinese Ultra High Net Worth individuals is expected to grow 80% in the next 10 years, with the luxury market expected to double in the next six years to \$590 billion. If just 2% of the Chinese and Vietnamese markets use only 2 grams of rhino horn a year we would need 55.68 tons annually. This doesn't take market growth into account.

If we could harvest the horns of 65% of the current 20 000 rhino in South Africa every three years – getting about 3.5kg per rhino – we would have the princely sum of 15 tons of rhino horn to sell annually. Even including the current stockpile of 18 tons, the massive shortfall is evident. (“Asian Demographics, The Cult of the Luxury Goods Industry and its Aftermath for Endangered Wildlife,” Dex Kotze)

The idea that we can control trade in any of the consumer countries or even our own is in itself a bold assumption. When taking into account the high level of corruption in South Africa viewed against a backdrop of very poor wildlife crime scorecards in China and Vietnam, little scientific study is needed to raise questions around the control of trade, although such study is encouraged.

The legal sale of 102 tons of elephant ivory in 2008 was followed by a massive increase in elephant poaching and it is estimated that 30 000 elephants are killed annually for their ivory, with the legal sale serving to launder the poached ivory. It is impossible to tell the difference between legal and illegal elephant ivory and this severely inhibits judicial process.

The economics used thus far to justify the legalisation of trade has seriously flawed assumptions and contradictory purposes. Firstly, that

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flooding the market would crash the price and thus demand, and the second that the money generated from the sale can go back into rhino conservation. Clearly one can only attain one of these goals.

One of the key points around the economic model presented is that a highly value natural resource is being stripped from our country with no economic benefit to the locals. Rhino horn is valued at about \$70 000 per kg and when extrapolating this it would then seem that one could plough millions of rands back into conservation.

In reality this is not the case; the poacher gets 10-20% of the value of the horn with the retail trader retaining 60-70% of the value (“Rhino Horn and the Economics of Wildlife Trade: Risks and Uncertainties,” Francisco Aguayo and Alejandro Nadal). This means that the price is entirely controlled at the end of the supply chain and the money to be made in the beginning of the chain would largely be consumed by the implementation of the sales system itself.

The idea that those criminal syndicates who trade in wildlife, humans and drugs would suddenly give up a lucrative trade with an insatiable market due to the availability of legal products contravenes the very nature of these very pathological criminals. Although it is a credit to man that he is ever hopeful in the reform of others it is nonetheless, unlikely.

Demand reduction campaigns have received little validation as they are in conflict with the current aims to trade. WildAid have reported a reduction of 50% in the use of shark fin soup, thanks to the ban of the soup at official events and

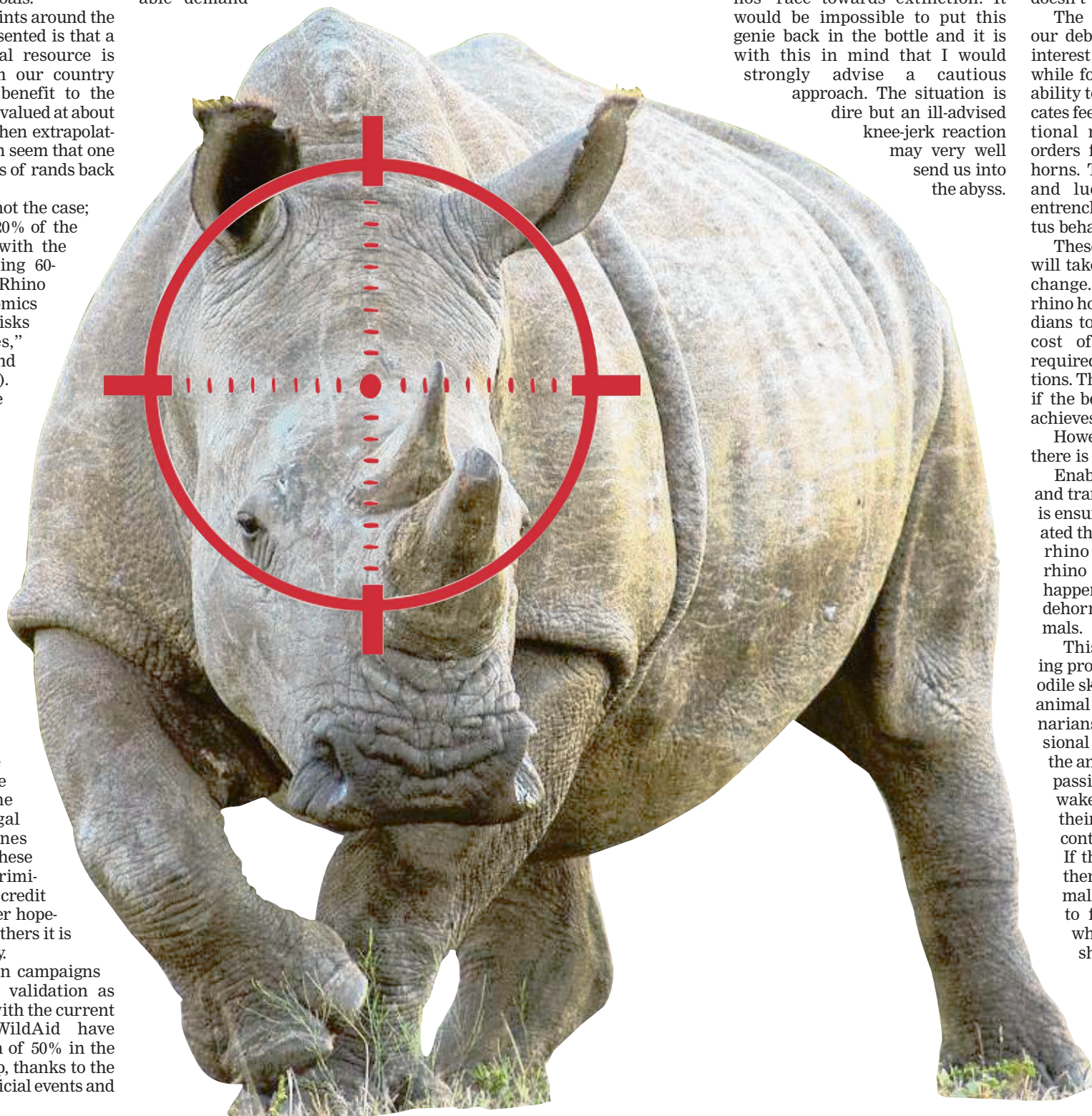
WildAid's demand reduction campaign. The ancient Chinese custom of foot binding has been largely eradicated by legislation and re-education. It is thus evident that with political will and concerted educational effort it is possible to alter strongly held cultural beliefs.

After extensive research, workable demand

reduction campaigns have been designed and actively promoted throughout China and Vietnam over the past 10 months. These are starting to gain traction and stand a chance of changing the way in which animals and animal products are viewed. But with the growing call for legalised trade, a mixed message is being sent. On one

hand the message is that rhino horn has no medicinal value and on the other that we want to sell it to you!

Ultimately, the question that needs answering is: will the legal trade in rhino horn end poaching? When one weighs up just these few simple facts it quickly becomes clear that in all likelihood it will not, and may very well escalate the rhinos' race towards extinction. It would be impossible to put this genie back in the bottle and it is with this in mind that I would strongly advise a cautious approach. The situation is dire but an ill-advised knee-jerk reaction may very well send us into the abyss.



## FOR...

**I**N MY opinion, the debate around whether to trade rhino horn or not comes down to a simple question. Do we want this species to survive or are we happy to let it slowly drift to extinction?

If we want the species to survive we need to use every option available to us to enable and support the fight for the survival of rhinos. If we don't, then we can continue to debate the issue, generate academic papers and put up billboards telling consumers that rhino horn really doesn't work.

The criminal syndicates enjoy our debates, read the papers with interest and laugh at the billboards, while focusing on improving their ability to poach rhinos. Local syndicates feed the horn into the international market, meeting monthly orders for an average of 150-plus horns. This is a highly structured and lucrative trade, driven by entrenched cultural beliefs and status behaviour.

These beliefs and this behaviour will take at least one generation to change. Harvesting and trading rhino horn would allow rhino custodians to sustainably fund the high cost of the security measures required to protect their populations. This may be a short-term cost, if the behaviour-change movement achieves a miracle.

However, every indication is that there is no miracle out there.

Enabling this trade in an ethical and transparent way is possible, as is ensuring that the funding generated through the sale does support rhino protection. Harvesting rhino horn without killing rhino happens regularly, as part of the dehorning effort to protect animals.

This is not the same as harvesting products such as ivory or crocodile skins which requires that the animal is killed. Licensed veterinarians dart the rhinos, professional teams harvest the horn and the animals are treated with compassion and respect. When they wake up, the rhinos return to their natural environments and continue to live productive lives. If the trade in horn is legalised, then it is likely that some animals may be darted every four to five years, which seems a whole lot better than being shot once.

Trade in rhino horn will also enable the expansion in rhino range again. Until 2008, there was a steady increase in rhino range across South Africa, driven

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by the trophy hunting and eco-tourism markets. Today, their range is shrinking. A number of old populations have been wiped out through poaching, many of the existing smaller populations have been consolidated into better protected reserves and establishing new populations is simply too expensive and dangerous.

This is a clear sign that the rhino survival battle is being lost. This is not for lack of effort or investment. South Africa's state, private and charitable sectors now spend hundreds of millions on rhino security efforts every year. This is funding that was being used to support non-rhino conservation efforts or other societal needs.

This investment is on-going and escalates all the time, with every effort to reduce investment being welcomed by syndicates who exploit every opportunity to poach more animals. Throughout the country, non-rhino conservation areas are being stripped of their best staff and operational budgets. Thus the impact of rhino poaching extends well beyond the loss of this species. All conservation efforts are being undermined and this is bad news for all of us, as it means that the rivers, wetlands, forests, grasslands and other ecosystems which sustain us, are being neglected and are deteriorating.

Trade in rhino horn will help balance this impact. The counter argument that the trade will not satisfy the market is probably true. However, it will enable greater security and will probably reduce the price being paid for black-market horn.

The argument that enabling trade will reinforce traditional consumer beliefs is also probably true. However, the point is that the existing consumers are likely to continue to be consumers, irrespective of advocacy efforts.

Advocacy efforts will gain traction with the new generation of “modern” consumers. We need to match regulated trade with relevant and long term advocacy efforts.

Last year more rhinos were poached than were born. This year's figures suggest that this will happen again. So the slow drift to extinction has started...

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