

New Scientist

World must resist pressure to lift ban on trade in rhino horn

Allowing seized and farmed rhino horn to be traded to fund conservation measures will simply encourage more poaching, says **Richard Schiffman**

By **Richard Schiffman**

A battle is brewing over rhino horn in South Africa. This week, the Convention on Trade In Endangered Species (CITES) shines a spotlight on the alarming decline in rhino numbers.

From half a million animals at the beginning of the 20th century, there are 29,000 surviving today, most in southern Africa and in fragmented enclaves in Asia. Three of the five remaining rhino species are [critically endangered due to increased poaching](#), fuelled by a doubling in the illicit horn trade since 2013.

As the 181 nations that make up CITES meet in Johannesburg, pressure to legalise the rhino horn trade will reach a peak. [Swaziland is leading the charge](#). It wants to sell 330 kilograms of stockpiled horn and an extra 20 kilograms a year, mainly taken humanely from farm-kept rhino, to raise millions of dollars for costly anti-poaching measures. Support may come from neighbouring South Africa, with which Swaziland has close ties, plus Namibia and Zimbabwe.

CITES has a history of relaxing its bans, but should not be tempted again. As [Adam Roberts, CEO of the animal advocacy group Born Free USA](#), points out, when [CITES created a limited legal market for stockpiled elephant ivory in 1997](#), poaching went through the roof. Fresh efforts to revive that approach have been [condemned in a recent study](#).

Any lifting of the 1977 ban on the rhino horn trade would open the door to laundering illegal ivory by mixing it with the legal stock, making law enforcement harder. Poachers would rejoice.

There are better ways to improve conservation. CITES must encourage nations to share information and technology, such as DNA sampling to track illicit horn, and pressure countries like Mozambique, [long a refuge for poachers](#), to put its house in order.

Worst offender

Most importantly, it must turn its guns on consumer nations in East Asia. The worst offender is Vietnam, where buyers pay up to \$300,000 per rhino horn and law enforcement is sparse. It has never had a successful prosecution for trafficking, although efforts are under way to [change people's attitudes to rhino horn](#).

In China, where enforcement is a bit better, rhino horn sales are often made on under-the-radar social media sites. In addition to buying luxury carvings and quack medicinal powders, buyers there are stocking up on it as a speculative investment – given the looming threat of extinction.

Lynn Johnson, founder of Australian conservation group [Breaking the Brand](#), is clear that rather than selling seized or farmed horn to fund wildlife policing, it's more cost-effective to target demand. Businessmen, who use gifts of horn to flaunt their wealth and close deals, are the main buyers.

Johnson's group places shaming adverts in business magazines, showing executives presenting horns and sharing rhino-horn-spiked rice wine. It also points out that some horns are infused with neurotoxic organophosphates by game officials in Africa, posing a deadly threat to Asian users.

If all else fails, take Colman O'Criodain's advice. The wildlife trade analyst for WWF [believes Vietnam needs to be put on notice](#) that if it doesn't crack down on the trade, it will face punitive international sanctions.

If shaming and education fail, perhaps money can still talk, but not in the way Swaziland wants.

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