

The rhinos crisis in South Africa

The reasons behind the poaching

South Africa has an 85% of all the rhino's in Africa, with an estimated 22,000 animals, but those rhinos are being decimated at an alarming increasing rate every year.

Last year 668 rhinos were killed in this country. Up to a couple of days ago, 704 rhinos had been slaughtered in South Africa, and it is estimated that around 900 -1,000 rhinos will be killed by the end of the year. It is calculated that more than 1,000 rhinos will be poached next year.

The rates of the killing of these animals are quite disturbing, taking in consideration that in the year 2000, only 7 rhinos were poached in the whole of South Africa.

Most of the poaching takes place in the well famous Kruger Park. This year alone, 396 animals have been killed (Up to the last data captured in early September, 2013). This year alone in this park 67 arrests have been made so far.

The methods used by the contemporary poachers are not the traditional ones, as now they have the financial ways to use the most modern technologies, get modern weapons and corrupted people in high places in governments for them to succeed.

But why is this happening?

Traditional Chinese medicine and the medical demand of other Asian countries (e.g. Malaysia, Thailand, Taiwan, India, S. Korea, etc.), have been using rhino horn powder for centuries to treat all sorts of health problems that range from fever, snakebites, headaches, food poisoning, vomiting, hallucinations, rheumatism, etc. to devil possession. Rhino horn has also been used more recently as a theoretically cure for cancer.

Now the very wealthy people in Vietnam and other countries in Asia can afford to pay up to \$65,000 for a kilogram of rhino horn. These days, the value of a rhino horn has the double of value than gold and platinum, making this illegal trade much more valuable than the diamonds and cocaine trade.

But desperate times call for desperate measures.

In South Africa, rangers have been dehorning the rhinos to discourage the poachers. Namibia was the first country to use this technique in 1989, but itself it is not enough to save the rhinos, plus it is a quite risky surgery for the rhinos and very expensive.

Due to the continuous increase of the poaching in South Africa, since 2012, wildlife managers and private game reserves have been injecting the rhino horns with a poison that while it is not deadly it can make the rhino horn consumers quite ill. This poison also has a dye that can be detected by the airport scanners in complete horns, pieces or as powder.

Kruger Park and other game parks in this country are already using drones and video cameras which constantly monitor the areas, plus brave patrolling rangers scan the land on foot, on planes and trucks looking for the poachers every day. But even with all these immense efforts, about 2+ rhinos are killed a day.

In the last years, Vietnam became the main country that received rhino horn from South Africa.

By 2007, five separated Vietnamese run syndicates were identified by South African authorities as the leaders in getting trophy hunting rhino horns from this country to Vietnam, by their so-called "*hunters*", that often had not even a remote idea about how to use a rifle.

According to the excellent new book of Dr. Ronald Orenstein: "Ivory, Horn and Blood", Thai residents in South Africa figured a way to kill rhinos without getting the expensive CITES exporting permits and tramits. Thailand nationals and also several Thai prostitutes in Johannesburg, for less than \$600 have been pretending to be rhino trophy hunter's tourists. The Thai organizers only needed to show their passport to the authorities, and with the help of their accomplices, a couple of South African hunters, they killed many rhinos. Briefly using the horns as trophy hunting's, they proceeded to take it to Cambodia, where the mafia leaders are. These type of hunts are called "*pseudo-hunting's*".*

This summer, South Africa announced that they are backing the legalization of trade in rhino horns, as an effort to end the poaching of rhinos in that country.

Many rhino experts and conservation agencies working directly on the rhino conservation, responded that this type of legal trade has proven to be inefficient for the African elephants, so it will not work for the rhinos either.

Actually, the legal trade of confiscated elephant ivory, has proven to be a total disaster for the African elephants, increasing their poaching to record numbers and fuelling the illegal trade of ivory, even if the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which approved such bloody and deadly "one - time sales" of ivory hasn't admitted it yet.

Dr. Orenstein mentioned on his book that since April 2012, new enforcement rules came in effect and the applications from China, Thailand and Vietnam ended, but this led to the "*proxy hunters*" from the Czech Republic (where they are many Vietnamese immigrants) and then it was followed by Poland. Apparently these hunters shot the animals themselves, but in reality they were just there to ship the horns to Asia from their own countries. After the applications from these two countries fell, there has been an increase in applications from Russia and the US*

Behind all these complex strategies, in reality it is the poverty, demand and crime that fuels this trade.

Unfortunately, while there are millions of poor jobless people in Africa and there are corrupt Asian countries with wealthy people demanding rhino horn, which in turn offers the opportunity to make some easy money illegally, the African rhinos, African elephants and other endangered animals, will keep been the main victims of this illegal trade in South Africa and the African continent.

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* Orenstein, Ronald 2013, "Ivory, Horn and Blood" Firefly books.

(Check my review on this book in the Elephant Section)