

We must save rhinos from dehorning

[Environment](#), [Animals](#)



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Since their horn is the only reason why the rhinos are being poached, there would be no need for any form of protection if rhinos would be born without a horn. Another approach to take away the incentives of the poachers is thus to strategically dehorn rhinos. Rhinos are darted from the ground or from helicopters, sedated and their horn is sawn off using a chainsaw, just a few inches above the skull. When cut too close to the skull of the animal however, infections and deformed horn regeneration is a substantial risk. Consequentially, after the removal process the rhino is left with a small stump on its head which serves as the basis for future horn regeneration. Rhino horn regenerates at a rate of approximately 2 inches per year and depending on individual horn regrowth rates, the ideal frequency of dehorning is between 12 and 24 months. In South-Africa, dehorning of rhinos has been taken place only on private land since the start of the poaching crisis. In South-Africa no data exists on the effectiveness of dehorning, although it is sure that at least five dehorned rhinos have been killed by poachers from 2008 to 2011.

In Zimbabwe there is more available data on the effectiveness of dehorning efforts, albeit rather scarce. One important conclusion that can be drawn is that dehorning as a standalone strategy is not effective and needs to be completed with complementary efforts of protection and security. The reserve with the best security measures has little to none rhino losses and has undertaken no dehorning efforts. By contrast, rhino losses were 10 times greater in other reserves that are poorly protected but did in fact use dehorning as a way of poaching discouragement. Furthermore, the data

suggests that the relative losses of horned rhinos versus dehorned rhinos remain the same.

Because of the astronomical and increasing prices of rhino horn combined with the precondition of leaving a part of the horn attached, dehorning as a means to discourage rhino poaching appears ineffective. While in some cases poachers may be disinterested in killing a dehorned rhino, evidence suggests that poachers are equally interested in a rhino horn stump left after dehorning. Moreover, findings by Lindsey and Taylor show that if dehorning is not accompanied by security efforts and other complementary anti-poaching measures, dehorning is not an effective way of poaching discouragement.

The war against poaching has intensified and has become increasingly militarized, both on public and private land. Rangers and anti-poaching units are now patrolling the rhino's lands every hour of the day, risking their lives in order to save an animals'. The increased military-style protection is a consequence of the need to protect the animals, but also personal safety is and should be a primary concern. In 2015, four members of an anti-poaching unit in Garamba National Park in Congo were killed after tracking an elephant's GPS collar straight to a poachers' hideout. The 10-member patrol team was outnumbered and after heavy gunfire erupted, three wildlife wardens and a soldier were killed. A 2012 interview conducted by LUSTRUM 2014 has a senior ranger explaining that:

"[Poachers have] come in with AK-47s, the well-known AK-47. ... We know from having spoken to some of the poachers that those AK-47s are there to

be used against us. ... We arrested one poacher with a hand grenade in his possession. You don't poach rhinos with a hand grenade. We've arrested a number of them with pistols. You don't shoot rhinos with pistols. So, yes, there's huge danger involved for our rangers, our field staff. And that is why we go to huge trouble, ongoing efforts to train and retrain our staff members in that regard. And we're talking military doctrines, dash down, crawl, observe fire ... Recently we picked up an RPG-7 rocket grenade. What do you think? You don't poach rhinos with that either."

In Kruger Park, there has been an expansion of the paramilitary ranger force and even the national army has been deployed to assist rangers with anti-poaching activities and to guard the international border within the park. South Africa has put its focus of anti-poaching on militarization and has invested most of its anti-poaching resources in this method. Retired Major-General Johan Jooste has been appointed in 2012 as coordinator for military operations in Kruger Park, which further demonstrates the interests in militarization. This military approach is not confined to South Africa alone. It mirrors a broader pattern of militarization of conservation around the world that some authors have labelled green militarization. Not only increased numbers of personnel and arms, but also the introduction of modern techniques and technology such as surveillance techniques, informant networks and camera traps are a part of this method.

This shift towards green militarization can have undesired effects and in fact be counterproductive. Through this increased military-style enforcement the colonial stereotypes of black poachers versus the white saviours being the

park management are being strengthened. Donations are being attracted for the so-called ‘ Fallen Rangers Fund’ for the Virunga National Park, where the park rangers are presented as (fallen) heroes. This demonstrates an increasing gap between local communities and the park authorities. Interviews in this regard have exposed that local women are deeply concerned about the poaching phenomenon and that it might take their children’s or husband’s lives. A convicted Mozambican poacher has shared that “.. our parents worry that rangers will kill us. They do warn us but we don’t listen. Sometimes they have community meetings to talk to us about the dangers of poaching.” This evidence suggests the further alienation of local communities from conservation and protected areas.

While the increased militarization has lead to many arrests and confirmed deaths of poachers, up to the point where authorities no longer share the death toll with the public, rhino poaching statistics remain high. Not only has militarization not lead to the poaching decrease which was hoped for, but it alienates the local communities where poachers are being recruited even more. The deaths of poaching suspects have become one more way how community members and the National Parks are being polarized. These are the very communities with whom the parks need to build trust and solid relationships in order to stop the drafting and concealing of poachers. Besides these social costs there are also the obvious high financial costs of military enforcement, which could be invested in other more effective methods of anti-poaching.

If there is no demand for a product, then there will be no (costly) supply and hence no trade. So an effective way to suppress illegal poaching would be to eradicate supply. This approach has been proven effective in the past as a way of reducing trade in tiger skins among Tibetans. After a campaign was launched to raise awareness of the tiger's plight and even an appeal by the Dalai Lama for Tibetans to stop wearing robes made out of tiger skin, demand fell drastically. It had become socially unacceptable to wear or sell products derived from tiger skin, and demand in Tibet has now disappeared.

Demand reduction for rhino horn products will take time. Cultural and historical beliefs are deeply rooted within the societies of consumer countries and even go back to the second century BC. In the past years, demand reduction efforts have been made through coordinated efforts by international and local authorities, NGO's and interest groups. In 2014 a large-scale awareness campaign named Chi Initiative was launched and was developed using a 5-step behavior change methodology. The first step is to investigate who is the target audience. Their research identified " Mr. L" as the most prolific consumer group, a wealthy urban male who cares about his health and enjoys being seen as a leader at work and in his community.

Important to note is that he does not care about animal extinction and only sees their horn as a luxury product to advertise his wealth and status. In the second step, an appropriate messaging style is developed and in the Chi campaign this entailed the promotion of the idea that success, masculinity and good fortune comes from one's individual and internal character and not from rhino products. The third step is to define the key influencers. Who will

Mr. L likely listen to? Who is most able to influence his behavior? The Chi initiative secured support from various influential local opinion leaders and companies, including five government departments. The fourth step is to deliver the messages to Mr. L and investigate in what way the message is best delivered. Mr. L likes to go out in prominent places, read high-end magazines including Forbes Vietnam, Golf Today and others. In Vietnamese Airlines' business lounges the message was being displayed on billboards. Banners were placed on newspaper websites that are popular with businessmen. Other areas include luxury car shops, jewelry shops and electronic retailers. The fifth and final step was to evaluate the impact and refine where necessary.

The campaign is focused on the business community since this has been identified as a key user group, keen to show off their wealth and status. Earlier awareness campaigns have used images of rhinos and were branded with conservation organization's logos and ultimately had little effect since this user group is not influenced by such efforts. This market research by the Chi initiative has taught conservationists valuable lessons in this regard. Since the Chi campaign is relatively young, it is not yet at the stage where it is possible to measure changes in behavior or its impact on rhino poaching. There have been two consumer surveys with a relatively small sample size. This renders it difficult to robustly measure changes in consumer patterns. However, early insights suggest that there are in fact altered attitudes among Mr. L. and the initiative has been well received by its target audience and the project partners.

Another demand reduction campaign was launched in August 2013 in Vietnam. This campaign was designed to measure changes in demand for rhino horn by conducting more extensive public surveys. In contrast to the Chi initiative, this campaign focused not only on the very wealthy class but equally to other parts of the population and explicitly on the user group who believes in medical properties of the rhino horn. At the end of the 3rd year of the campaign, a third poll was conducted in 2016 to evaluate its effectiveness. The results show a drop from 51% of all respondents in 2013 believing that rhino horn has medicinal value to 28% of all respondents in 2016. There was also a significant drop in the overall percentage of respondents that bought or used rhino horn, from 4.2% in 2013 to 2.3% in 2016.

Prudent results of these campaigns prove their relative success. The reality is that assessments of such campaigns are both extremely hard and not robust in value, and it is difficult to reliably measure which had a significant impact in changing perceptions and behaviors.

That being said, since the launch of both campaigns statistics have shown no drop in rhino poaching. While surveys indicate a changed perception of the overall population, the consumption of rhino products seems to continue as it is. One possible explanation for this is the strong presence of repeat users who want to show off their wealth through rhino horn consumption no matter what it takes. A high price in fact favors this consumption group as it keeps the rhino horn to be seen as a luxury good. The usage of rhino horn as a traditional medicine might pertain because of the deeply-rooted beliefs in

culture, to which government and NGO campaigns have no effect. The educational aspect of the campaigns might have been successful within the general population, but habitual rhino horn users are not affected in their judgment when faced with rhino deaths. These campaigns may well have an impact on marginal consumers, but it seems very hard to get to the core of the problem and tackle the small group of actual consumers responsible for paying high prices that are driving the poaching problem. Other limitations inherent to awareness campaigns might also play a role. In China, a country of over 1.3 billion people and 56 different languages, it is extremely challenging to reach even 1% of that total spread. Moreover, traditional medicine is so well entrenched in China that multiple generations would need to pass to divert beliefs away from some of the products they believe to have therapeutic and medicinal properties. This is an unrealistic timeframe to prevent the extinction of the rhinos.

In summary, the challenge for rhino conservation is not that there is an ever-growing demand in the two biggest consumer countries. It is rather the existence of a relatively small number of perpetual users who are not affected by legality and ethical arguments put forward by demand reduction campaigns. Contrarily, these consumers are willing to pay increasingly high prices in order to satisfy their needs despite behavioral campaigns.