

Rhino at the crossroads

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Conservationists met today for a conference to get international support for a reversing of the Cites ban on rhino horn trade. AP

DURBAN - Conservationists from across southern Africa met in Pretoria today for a conference aimed at getting international support for a reversing of the Cites ban on international trade in rhino horn.

Wanting an end to the ban on a trade that sees rhino slaughtered in their thousands by poachers seems contrary to conservationists' ideals, but the sad fact is that the Cites ban has not worked since it was introduced, with every good intention, back in 1977. It's something you have to get your head around

Rhino horn has a huge cultural and medicinal significance in countries such as China and Vietnam. With their economic upsurge over recent decades, a class has emerged with great purchasing power. The result is illegal rhino horn having a scarcity value higher than gold.

The money pumped into the illegal market makes possible the funding of poaching in Africa on a massive scale, far outpacing the resources available to those traditionally charged with protecting and conserving the species.

The result over the past 40-odd years has been catastrophic. Two of Africa's six sub-species have recently gone extinct - the Western Black Rhino in 2006 and the Northern White Rhino last year. The rest - occurring mainly in southern Africa - are under pressure from poaching, organised usually from beyond national borders and sometimes with the connivance of corrupt officials.

At the current rate of mortality, more rhino are being killed than are being born, and extinction looms.

The crisis is aggravated by a serious shrinkage of the rhinos' natural habitat - grassland savannah for the white, woodland for the black.

Southern Africa's conservationists have responded by forming an organisation called Legal Trade for Rhino Survival, which wants the Cites ban lifted so that legal trade in rhino horn can be resumed under strict controls.

Natural attrition would supply a significant portion of international demand for rhino horn (huge stocks exist). The balance could be made up by harvesting rhino horn in the private sector parks, a harmless process.

Rhino horn may be sawed off the same way a cow's horns are sawn. The rhino horn grows back. There's no need for a single rhino to be killed for its horn.

But it's an emotional issue for many; sentiment runs strong among the uninformed. Also, there are those who have built careers on fostering this emotional sentiment.

Here lies a great irony. The countries that support the Cites ban have no rhino. Those behind LTRS, who have responsibility for the well-being of rhino, have under their control and protection some 90% of the world's rhino population. They would dearly like a share of the international trade, to fund their very expensive operations against poaching.

Today's conference will be opened by Eswatini's (Swaziland's) minister of tourism and environmental affairs. The keynote address will be by his Namibian counterpart. Another address will be by the president of Wildlife Ranching SA. All kinds of people, diplomats included, are expected.

Delegates are expected to listen very carefully to what Dr George Hughes has to say. He's a former chief executive of the Natal Parks Board (now Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife), which is credited with rescuing the white rhino from extinction 50-odd years ago. He has a story to tell.

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