

# On a Knife's Edge: The Rhinoceros Horn Trade in Yemen

## A TRAFFIC Network Report

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### Summary

While Asia's rhinoceroses have been poached predominantly for their horn to be made into medicines in eastern Asia, the horn of Africa's rhinoceroses has been in demand for both medicines and production of traditional dagger handles in the Middle East, especially Yemen.

Dagger-like knives have been part of a man's traditional dress in Yemen for centuries. Known as *jamibyas*, these daggers are worn daily by many Yemeni men and serve as an important status symbol. The quality of the blade, sheath, belt and handle decorations are all important, but the most prestigious element of a *jambiya* is a good rhinoceros horn handle.

This report examines the continuing use of rhinoceros horn in the production of the *jambiya* in Yemen. The report documents the results of TRAFFIC and WWF fieldwork data collected on the trade in rhinoceros horn in Yemen from 1978–1996. It focuses on the centuries-old trade in horn of Black Rhinoceros *Diceros bicornis* and White Rhinoceros *Ceratotherium simum* from Africa to Sanaa, Yemen's capital.

Today, there are only an estimated 2,400 Black Rhinoceros and 7,562 White Rhinoceros left in the wild in Africa, compared to approximately 70,000 in total in 1970. Snared, speared, shot with poisoned arrows and bullets for their horn, rhinoceros numbers in most populations have plummeted dramatically. The demand and trade in horn for *jamibyas* has been a major contributory factor to this decline, and continues to threaten Africa's rhinoceros populations.

## Background

Since the establishment of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), member States have devoted significant attention to the conservation of rhinoceroses. In 1975, CITES Parties listed all three Asian Rhinoceros species and the Northern White Rhinoceros *Ceratotherium simum cottoni* in Appendix I, and the Black Rhinoceros in Appendix II. By 1977, all remaining rhinoceroses were listed when the Southern White Rhinoceros *C. s. simum* and Black Rhinoceros were added to Appendix I, thereby creating a ban on international commercial trade in all rhinoceroses and their parts.

While concerted attempts have been made to encourage Yemen to accede to the Convention, as of 1 May 1997 it still had yet to officially do so. As early as 1992, the Yemen Cabinet issued a decree approving the accession and instructing the Foreign Minister to notify the appropriate Yemeni authorities. Most recently, a TRAFFIC delegation held meetings in late 1996 with senior officials concerning law enforcement and Yemen's plans to join CITES. As a direct result of these discussions, on 5 January 1997, Yemeni law decreed the way was set for the country to become a signatory to CITES. Still, Yemen did not become a signatory to the Convention.

The Yemen Government has made several attempts to ban the rhinoceros horn trade, with decrees promulgated by the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) and, since unity with the south in 1990, the Republic of Yemen (Yemen). These include a 1982 ban on the import of rhinoceros horn; a 1987 prohibition on the re-export of rhinoceros horn; and a 1992 decree banning domestic trade in raw rhinoceros horn, making it compulsory to register horn stocks and ordering inspections of rhinoceros horn stocks. In addition in 1987, every craftsman had to sign an agreement not to use rhinoceros horn.

Yemen remains the poorest country in peninsular Arabia and its impoverished population has one of the highest annual population growth rates (3.7%) in the world. The infrastructure in the country is inadequate, with considerable shortage in electricity, water and sewage services. In recent years, Yemen has faced the challenges of unification, the Gulf War and civil war. Clearly, there is a lack of adequate resources to prevent the illegal horn trade. This issue is simply not high on the list of priorities for the Yemen government, but while it is not addressed, African rhinoceroses will remain at great risk.

The demand for purchasing and wearing jambiyas of any material had increased greatly in Yemen, even though since 1990 the per

capita income has fallen by about 50 per cent. By 1996, the number of new jambiyas being made and worn of all handle types had increased to an unprecedented level. If Yemen were to become more affluent following its recent economic reforms, the demand for the much more expensive material of rhinoceros horn would increase under present demand trends.

## **The trade**

TRAFFIC closely monitored the workshops and retail traders in the three main centres of Sanaa, Taiz and Dhamar during 1996. In Sanaa's souk al Janabi, four craftsmen in separate shops were observed filing new rhinoceros horn handles and collecting the shavings. The survey also documented nine adult-size newly made jambiyas with new rhinoceros horn handles. Jambiyas of rhinoceros horn made about 10 years ago but clearly from illegal imports at the time were being sold in Sanaa and Taiz and in several other towns in Yemen.

Since the early 1970s, Yemen has been one of the largest consumers of rhinoceros horn in the world. It can be estimated that 67,050 kilos of rhinoceros horn have been imported into Yemen since 1970, although the true figure could be significantly higher. Based upon an average horn weight of three kilos, this volume could represent the horns of 22,350 rhinoceroses.

While rhinoceros horn imports have been banned since 1982 and most jambiya handles are now made from other substances, rhinoceros horn continues to be illegally imported into Yemen. The known minimum annual imports have declined from just under 500 kilos in the late 1980s to about 50 kilos in 1996. This 10-fold decrease in import volumes was likely due to a dramatic decline in the economic prosperity of the country, combined with the increased control in countries home to rhinoceroses, rather than the Yemeni ban.

From 1994–1996, annual imports of rhinoceros horn into Yemen averaged at least 75 kilos per year, which could equate to 25 rhinoceroses annually.

Once imported whole, rhinoceros horn is now usually cut into oblong pieces in Africa prior to being sent to Yemen to avoid detection. Since 1992, rhinoceros horn has been smuggled to Yemen by a number of routes. These have been by sea on traditional dhows and freighters or small motorboats to ports along the Yemen coast; by large modern ships to the Yemeni city of Hodeidah; by air

to Sanaa, mostly from Addis Ababa and Khartoum in recent years; by air from eastern African city airports to cities in Arabia and then overland across the unpatrolled desert; and by boats to neighbouring countries, mostly to Saudi Arabia but also to United Arab Emirates and to Oman, and then overland to Sanaa.

In 1996, unprocessed rhinoceros horn was purchased upon import in Yemen for US\$945 per kilo. Over 60 per cent of a rhinoceros horn used primarily for the manufacture of jambiya handles is left over as pieces, chips, fine shavings and powder, which are believed to be often illegally re-exported for the East Asian traditional medicine market.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The report contains a variety of recommendations as possible solutions and contributions that could be undertaken in Yemen if the required political, financial and infrastructural support can be achieved.

- Presently only domestic trade in raw rhinoceros horn is illegal in Yemen. The Government should strengthen the law to ensure that domestic trade in and use of rough handle pieces of rhinoceros horn as well as domestic trade in new jambiyas made from rhinoceros horn are illegal. The simplest enforcement method would be to make it an offence to possess a jambiya made from new rhinoceros horn. The Government should introduce strict penalties for offences.
- Regular Government inspections should be carried out in Sanaa, Taiz and Dhamar to check whether new rhinoceros horn is being used.
- The Government needs to formulate a comprehensive strategy to combat illegal imports of rhinoceros horn, the use of new rhinoceros horn and to facilitate co-operation between agencies. Co-operation between Yemen and African nations to prevent further smuggling of rhinoceros horn out of Africa is also required.
- A suitably valuable alternative material to rhinoceros horn should be sought after which the craftsmen can carve in their traditional manner. The craftsmen producing jambiya handles of semi-precious stones, gold or other valuable substances should be assisted and encouraged.
- A task force should be created of experts on the rhinoceros horn trade, including influential government officials and enforcement officers with invitations made by Yemen to pertinent experts from outside of the country. By allocating responsibility to such a task force, communications and follow-up over implementation of legislation would improve.
- Yemen should join CITES. Sources for obtaining external funds need to be identified and approached for support in implementation.
- If Yemen joins CITES, a major training exercise needs to be implemented to at least cover implementation and enforcement of CITES, domestic controls, identification of rhinoceros horn, and identification of new rhinoceros horn jambiyas in contrast to old jambiyas.