

HORNS OF CONTENTION



The rhino. A living legend

Early accounts of rhinos describe a mythical beast with armour-like skin and a fantastical horn protruding from its snout. Defiant yet intimidating, this animal must have impressed our ancestors with its might.

Often viewed with curiosity and reverence, rhinos have been worshipped for their strength, fierceness, and bravery. There has been historical documentation of their cultural, symbolic, religious, and medical significance, earning them a prominent place in folklore and likely inspiring fabled creatures like the Karakadann (Persian for rhinoceros) and unicorn.

The rhino's decline is driven in part by the deep-rooted superstitions and traditions surrounding the animal, particularly the use of horn, a prominent, but meaningless, component of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) now prevalent across Asia. Desire for rhino horn and other derivatives has reached unprecedented levels. The living legend is close to becoming a memory of the past.

"Rhinos are threatened not just by those who exploit them, but also by those who stand by and do nothing"

The mighty horn

Unlike other horned animals with horns composed of a bony core wrapped in a thin layer of keratin, a fibrous protein found in human hair and nails, rhino horns are entirely composed of keratin with an inner core of calcium deposits and melanin that protect the core from breaking down. The structure of them is similar to that of horse hooves

Horns are valuable behavioural and practical tools. Their magnificent appendages protruding from their snouts are both functional and impressive. The horns of these animals contribute to their notorious and formidable appearance, and it is not surprising that they use their horns for posturing, establishing territories, defending themselves, and fighting.

External factors, including the environment and continued use, wear down the horns, resulting in a gnarly appearance. The pointed tip and gentle curve (also a result of wear and tear and possibly growth rate) serve to dig for water, to unearth short grasses and edible roots, and to help females guide their young.

Beliefs to butchery

There has long been a thriving demand for traditional remedies in Asian countries, despite the widespread adoption of science-based medicine. The healing properties of rhino horn reign supreme in an exotic market where nature's oddities such as black bear bile, tiger bones, musk deer, seahorses and a bizarre array of other wildlife are revered. On the black market, rhino horn is more expensive per gram than gold, heroin, and cocaine, and it is used to treat a range of illnesses, including fever symptoms, nosebleeds, strokes, and cancer.

Aside from being used for medicinal purposes, rhino horn has been carved into libation cups (ceremonial drinking vessels) and fashioned into an endless array of curios including buttons, paper weights, belt buckles, Jambaya handles, and ornaments. In addition, ground horn has become popular as a recreational drug, and whole horns have become symbols of prestige, whose prices are influenced by scarcity.

The demand for rhino horn fuels poaching, particularly in South Africa, the epicenter of the poaching crisis, and more recently in Botswana, necessitating increased international efforts to protect rhinos and combat trafficking. Poachers leave a trail of wanton destruction in their wake as rhinos are left to die with horrific injuries.

The trouble with tradition

The word "tradition" originates from the Latin tradere or traderer, which means to hand over and to hand down. Through repetition of emotional and physical behaviors, traditions can foster a sense of belonging and security and an anchor to the past.

While many traditions can and are advantageous in modern society, many are not. Often without question and immune from scrutiny, tradition has become a cultural defense for continuing unethical practices.

Using rhino horn for emotional, practical, and spiritual purposes undermines conservation efforts, reinforces false expectations, and perpetuates needless rhino slaughter.

Legislation, education, and stigmatisation are all essential to reducing rhino horn demand. Changing a mindset that is rooted in centuries of tradition is possible because, like mindsets, traditions are permeable to change. Despite their once cultural significance, practices such as foot binding, capital punishment, the eunuch system (castrated males), human sacrifices, and Sati (the burning of widows) have been prohibited and are no longer accepted in modern society. Our efforts to stop rhino horn consumption can be accomplished in the same way.

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