

RHINOS IN CRISIS

Nature's environmental engineers

Today's rhinos are the descendants of an animal that roamed our planet over 40 million years ago. Paraceratherium was the largest land mammal ever to walk the Earth's surface. The titan stood over five metres tall at the shoulders, had a 26-foot-long body, and weighed a colossal 20 tonnes.

Today, rhinos, although still prehistoric looking, are thankfully smaller. Immediately recognisable, and iconic thanks to their majestic horns, though maybe not as high profile as elephants, they are equally imposing, charismatic and irreplaceable.

Their role in the ecosystem is unsurpassed. Rhinos are nature's environmental engineers. As well as shaping landscape topography through grazing, wallowing, and defecating, they also increase biodiversity. The changes they make ensure the survival of countless other species of flora and fauna. Lose rhinos and we risk losing other species too.

"Our legacy will be one of immense failure if we allow one of the most iconic and ecologically significant species in the world to go extinct"

A crisis spanning oceans and continents

Worldwide, the illegal wildlife trade is estimated to be worth £17 billion. Along with drugs, weapons, and human trafficking, it is one of the most lucrative transnational crimes.

Over 11,000kg of rhino horns with a black market value of over £175m have been seized since 2009, but more are smuggled undetected. In as little as 24 hours, horns can be transported from Africa to Asia.

In addition to being a low-risk and high-reward activity, rhino horn trafficking is intimately linked to other organised crimes and terrorist groups. Despite rhino poaching being geographically limited, its effects can be felt by all.

Massacred for a myth

Africa is a continent with a rich variety of wildlife and is home to 80% of the remaining wild rhinos in the world, but the continent is currently experiencing a wildlife genocide. South Africa has been the epicentre of rhino poaching in recent years, with approximately 8500 rhinos poached in the last decade (the country's annual tally excludes poaching survivors, survivors who later die, unborn calves, orphans, and poached rhinos found with intact horns). Consumer demand, almost exclusively in Asia, for rhino horn has pushed rhinos towards extinction.

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) prohibits all international trade in horn, yet demand remains high among consumers, and the illegal trade, fuelled by myth and superstition, flourishes. Today, rhino horn is worth more per gram than gold, heroin, and cocaine on the black market.

Rhino horn has been an essential practical, medical, and emotional staple for centuries. Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) has used horns as a cure for diseases, to soothe hangovers, and to increase virility, despite no scientific evidence to support their use. The horn is often used to symbolise wealth and status in the form of curios, ceremonial cups, dagger handles, buttons, and paper weights. Scarcity drives their value, making them a long-term investment. Ground horn is also popular among Vietnam's aspiring middle class and wealthy elite as a party drug.

Victims of violence

Once immobilised, the rhino's spinal cord is often severed to prevent the animal escaping. Rhino horns are not attached to the skull. A small portion of the horn is located below the surface of the skin. Poachers, however, will often remove the entire horn, leaving an enormous open wound in the nasal passage.

Horns are brutally removed using axes, pangas and chainsaws while the animal remains conscious before being left to suffer, often dying of blood loss, dehydration, shock, organ failure, or drowning in their own blood. Even babies are a target, despite having horns, no larger than a small stub.

Asia's appetite for rhino horn has become Africa's atrocity

- Since the beginning of the century, the white rhino population in Africa has declined by 96%.
- With only two surviving adult females, the northern white rhino (*a subspecies of white rhino*) is functionally extinct.
- Since the beginning of the century, the black rhino population in Africa has declined by 94%.
- In 2011, the western black rhino (*a subspecies of black rhino*) was declared extinct.

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