DAMNED IF YOU DO & DAMNED IF YOU DON'T - LEGALISING THE RHINO HORN TRADE

June 2012

My Journey to Vietnam

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The rhino is being hunted to extinction for its horn. As it becomes increasingly rare, the market value increases, further aggravating the situation. It has now become an ornamental object of status within Vietnamese society. A number of examples exist in Vietnam whereby status driven animal products were desired. When the market was over-supplied with these products, the value dropped off and with it demand. Could this work with the current stockpiles of rhino horn and subsequent harvesting of specified rhino across the world?

The horn is also being used in the Far East for traditional medicine, as it has for 1000's of years. Western philosophy calls for education in Asia to shift what has been portrayed as a culture running almost as deep as their DNA makeup itself. Media campaigns are costly and perhaps the money could be better spent on wildlife conservation.

A 35-year old international CITES trade ban on rhino horn is due for review in 2013. If passed, stockpiles of horn may be eligible for controlled sale to the Far East. Protected areas holding rhino will, without harming the animal, be able to harvest the horn every three years as it continually grows back. If managed correctly, large amounts of funding could be injected into a struggling wildlife conservation industry.

I travelled to Vietnam to explore the option of education against the use of horn and also to understand a culture of traditional medicine use dating back 2500 years. My insight here is not just about the survival of a species, but the logical use of a sustainable resource.

The Trade, the Logic

The illegal trade in wildlife is a multi billion-dollar industry. One of the largest criminal industries in the world. The flagship specie driving public awareness towards this major thereat to biodiversity at the moment is the rhinoceros.

Across Africa, rhino populations have been decimated for decades. Of note is the demise of black rhino numbers across the continent by more than 96% in just 30 years. This is one of the most rapid declines of any large mammal recorded. The stronghold of rhinos has now been reduced primarily to South Africa. A cascading level of destruction now sweeps remaining populations across Southern Africa. This has sparked a knee-jerk public outcry that has put the situation onto the global stage in a seemingly bigger way than ever before. But is it too late? Has the last rhino to die already been born?

South Africa alone lost 448 rhino during 2011 in targeted attacks for their precious and increasingly valuable horn. This year is shaping up to be much more devastating, with an estimated 600 to be murdered by the end of the year. Half of these deaths will be in the continents premier park, Kruger, which hosts the world's largest population of rhino. These numbers may seem dramatic, but historical losses are far more significant. In the 1960's up to 8000 per year were being killed across Africa. The difference now is that there are such limited numbers left to poach, and it's seemingly much more intense in the concentrated stronghold of South Africa.

Since 1977, CITES, or the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species, has attempted to stop the global trade in rhino horn by maintaining an international trade ban. The annual cost of maintaining this status is now increasing dramatically. This ban has pushed the trade underground and onto the black market in order to feed demand. Many believe this is now aggravating the situation. Despite toughening sentences, the scarcity and growing price of rhino horn is increasing demand. This is making it a more viable option for poachers and middlemen involved with the trade.

The horn, holding seemingly mystical healing powers within various traditional Asian medical practices, now sells for vast amounts to the end buyer on the streets in Vietnam. Vietnam is the current hotspot destination in the Far East for rhino horn trade, fuelled by cultural heritage, economic growth, social status and desperation for disease cure.

I travelled to Vietnam to investigate the history of Traditional Vietnamese Medicine, the cultural beliefs that can easily be misunderstood by western society, and the future of rhino horn use in the

Far East. One thing is apparent - the fate of the rhino is at stake. The question remains though; is the solution to this raging war right under our nose. Can beliefs dating back millennia simply be changed and the rhino horn be no longer desired. This is one of the primary suggestions being put forward at the moment.

What if the demand for rhino horn could be met and a good majority of the revenue put back into conservation? For this to happen, CITES representatives would need to make a landmark decision at the 2013 summit and lift a 35 year ban. This would require a majority two-thirds of the 160 votes with a blocking vote of 54. 27 of these votes will come from the EU, largely responsible for hunting the rhino to the brink of extinction and whose efforts to conserve there own threatened species have largely failed. Other key nations such as Australia will also weigh in. Australia has the worst record for extinction of its own mammal species over the last 200 years than anywhere else in the world. 27 of their species have become extinct. This is compared with 26 different mammal species in total across Africa's 54 countries in the same period. If the decision is not passed at this meeting, then 2016 will be the next opportunity to possibly save the rhino from extinction in the wild.

We argue about the barbaric use of rhino horn by Asian's for what we perceive as a myth. But we all need to be reminded of some simple facts. We take milk from cows, wool from sheep, eggs from birds and honey from bees. There are not too many other creatures that us humans need mainstream products from that we don't have to kill for. The rhino, with its precious horn, although not mainstream, could be one of these creatures. A rhino will live to be almost 40 years old. Once mature at four, the horn can be taken off every 3 years and it will continue to grow back, much like human hair that we all spend so much time and money on.

Whilst the thought of eternally free ranging rhinos are romantic, the logic in me questions if the survival ideology alone is enough for the human race to sustain something in the long run. For a species that has hardly evolved for millions of years, but which is suddenly at the cross roads, my thoughts in the overall goodness of the human race are somewhat challenged. Without a value on an animal, is there enough good to keep it alive?

I personally don't know if the legalisation in the rhino horn trade is the definite answer to the future of the rhino, and no one can guarantee this. One thing I do know is that the current situation of trying to preserve them, with limited resources on the ground, is not sustainable overall. Rhinos are on a one-way path to extinction in the wild, and we need to be discussing our options. One thing is certain; no one would genuinely want this animal to be wiped from the planets wilderness areas. What we do need is coordination in the way forward with this issue, and support for the rangers on the ground whilst perspectives are argued at policy level. If we had a magic wand, and could inject 5% of South Africa's annual defence budget, or 1.92 billion Rand (US$270mil), then

perhaps we would not need to be looking at alternatives. Unfortunately, conservation is an afterthought for many people globally, when weighed against the likes of defence or health care.

This whole rhino situation is a controversial subject with opinions for and against legalisation on both sides of the fence. Whatever you perceive my point-of-view to be, please remember, they are just mine.

Saigon and Traditional Vietnamese Medicine

After arriving in Ho Chi Minh City, or Saigon as it is still affectingly known as by the locals, I settle in and get ready for the trip ahead. After several trips already to Vietnam and some good local contacts, I understand the reclusive nature of the Vietnamese people and the potential for suspicion of westerners. If I don't sell my approach in the correct way, I'll get no information at all in regards to traditional medicine and the use of rhino horn.

I begin my journey north. It takes me through Saigon, into the Mekong Delta jungles on the border of Cambodia and up through the country to the capital Hanoi. I explore the local perspectives of similar practices that occur across most of the Far East, Latin America, India, Africa and many other parts of the world; the use of animal parts within traditional medicine practices. It may seem right to certain cultures and wrong to others. What we cant hide though, is that it happens, and in the case of rhino horn, on an alarming and violent scale. It spans many levels of society, from crime bosses, law-enforcement officers, villagers, conservationists, veterinarians, diplomats, and people dying of disease in Asian countries where rhino's are now extinct because of mismanagement.

Although Vietnam is modernizing quickly, traditional medicine has not disappeared and if anything, is gaining something of a revitalization. Traditional Vietnamese and Chinese medicine evolved together and arguably the development of the two are so interwoven that it is often difficult to separate.

At the Museum of Traditional Vietnamese Medicine (TVM) in Saigon I play the dumb tourist, not the CEO of an organization trying to help save the rhino from extinction. I learn of a long and time-honored history here. As far back as the 2nd century BC, hundreds of medical herbs were discovered; among them also were precious compounds such as pearl, tortoise-shell, aloe wood, rhinoceros horn and cinnamon. Through trial and error, many kinds of food, vegetable, fruit, herbs and natural compounds were discovered to be drugs or medicines. Whereas this traditional medicine was once only used for the poor, it is now more likely to be used by the middle and upper classes that find their way to a traditional physician either because Western medicine is not working for them, or because they are skeptical about Western medicine in Vietnam. Today, one third of Vietnamese rely exclusively on traditional medicine and over 90% use it on a regular basis.

To properly understand TVM, we must first understand the philosophy of Eastern medicine or Dong Y, which dates back thousands of years. People belonging to Asian cultures are accustomed to relying on distinct health practices and beliefs that are significantly different from those of Western beliefs. These Western principles are so different that it is often hard for us to comprehend. We Westerners approach disease by assuming it is from an external force such as bacteria or virus or a slow breakdown of a functional ability of the body.

The cornerstone of Dong Y theory is based on the observed effects of Qi (energy) and the balance of Ying and Yang. Asian patients have a mind-set where healthiness is a state of balance of Qi, or life-force, between physical, social and the supernatural. They perceive the body to be whole and each part intimately connected. The system of TVM across most of Vietnam is built on the foundation that all living organisms are made up of the five main elements; wood, metal, fire, earth and water. These have the characteristics of hot, cold, wet and dry. An imbalance in Qi can lead to an illness as it fails to travel through the complex channels of the body. Qi encompasses more than just energy. It is also blood and fuel gathered and stored by the body. The concept of Qi is universal - our energy and that of the universe is transferable. Poor diet, hard work or a bad lifestyle can deplete Qi, just as maintaining a healthily lifestyle and practicing breathing can restore or harvest energy from the universe. The task of a traditional medicine practitioner is to identify and correct disharmonies based the three divisions of Ying and Yang - cold versus hot, interior versus exterior and deficiency versus excess. Prescriptions of plant extracts and other elements can then be prescribed to correct an imbalance.

As I walk through the streets of Saigon where traditional treatments are sold, I converse through my translator to the traders and customers. The treatments are nonthreatening, and seem to have therapeutic benefits in calming patients and restoring their confidence. This is because the methods and medicines are so deeply rooted in the Vietnamese culture. There is now also an increasing interest in using traditional medicine to supplement treatment of chronic illnesses, such as AIDS and cancer. I also frequently witness a combination of practices between Western medicine and traditional medicine. It is not uncommon for a patient to be admitted to hospital and treated by a doctor trained extensively in both disciplines.

In Saigon, I met with Stan Gunn, CEO of Vietnams largest media company. We spoke at length about the use of traditional medicine and the millennia long culture, which is almost set in concrete. He said a well-structured country wide campaign against the use of rhino horn would cost in the vicinity of US$40-50 million annually. He then asked me, “Do you think spending the same amount in the UK could convince Manchester United supporters to become Manchester City supporters.” The answer was obvious. He went on to highlight, “This is not just 1000’s of years of culture, this is 1000’s of years of ingrained DNA we are talking about and no amount of Western-based media campaigns would alter this. Asian’s just have different cultures and norms to Westerners and find our concerns about the preservation of wild animals curious and funny. To most Asians, wild animals simply represent food, medicine or money. A media campaign may have short-term impacts such as previous campaigns they had run, but follow-up surveys revealed very limited results, and not where it counts.” These comments were the honest response from a company that stood to make significant personal gains from any possible future media campaigns. He said that we were wasting our money with media campaigns in Asia, and that money would be better spent protecting the animals directly.

The Mekong Delta

Through a contact in Saigon and some handy Google advice, I manage to get an appointment with one of the countries most renowned physicians. But I had to travel to get there. Deep in the Mekong Delta, only a few miles from the border of Cambodia was my next destination. After riding as far as I could by bike, I took a long boat through thick jungle like vegetation to meet this man. Nguyen Van Be, usually referred to as "Ong Ba Dat Phen", translates to the ‘Man in the 2nd Position of the Family in the Acid Land’. After studying and eventually lecturing in Western medicine, Mr Be then moved to Dong Thap Muoi and set up the 1000 hectare sustainable nature reserve from where he practices traditional medicine and runs a pharmaceutical company. For the past 28 years he has transformed the area into a series of jungle canals, nurseries and balanced ecosystems between plants, animals and communities. The many laboratories onsite attract international guests studying both Dong Y and Western medicine. Mr B claims to be able to accurately use all of the native plants appearing in Vietnamese medicine and is leading efforts to rewrite ancient scriptures. The majority of traditional healers can only use around 80% of these plants at most. He sleeps only 4 hours a day and has not personally utilised any form of western medicine for nearly three decades.

We spoke at great length on arrival, eating and drinking with he and his wife. The aura of the man and his hospitality was humbling to be around. He drove us around the reserve explaining the many intricate ecological balances that revolve around each other. He spoke of previous issues similar to Africa; poaching, invasive species, fire and community resentment against a protected area – all issues he had eventually overcome. I became increasingly uneasy as I struggled to think of how I

would approach the issue of rhino horn with him. That the rhino horn trade is illegal is commonly known in Vietnam, yet it doesn't restrict its use and if anything makes it a seemingly more desirable commodity.

After arriving back at the main reception area, I took out my laptop and started the 2010 60 Minutes documentary of our team darting and de-horning rhino in Africa. We reached the point where the chainsaw was tearing through the horn of the great black rhino bull 'Shungu', and eventually it dropped to the ground. I stood holding the horn in my hand, something so desired in the Far East, something so valuable. We watched the animal receive the antidote, rise, and run off in a cloud of dust. The impact was profound. I had his attention. It was time to talk. We started a conversation that went on for 5 hours and would leave my interpreter exhausted, asleep at the table.

I explained of this this Great War raging in Africa. Of conservationists trying to save the rhino from extinction, and poachers from many levels of society risking their life to get their hands on this prize for sale to the Far East. I told him we were losing this war. I was not in Vietnam to point fingers, rather to understand the history and culture of TVM and the use of rhino horn. Was there a future for it and could education efforts from the West persuade against its use? He came to understand the desperation we were facing and the angle of my approach in Vietnam. Can the market demand be changed, if it can - how, if it can't - then what?

Although Mr Be's research and business now focus on the use of plant products, he has an intimate knowledge of rhino horn, its history within Eastern medicine and its healing properties. He spoke of a longer than 1000 year old history in Vietnam and of its appearance in the ancient scriptures of Traditional Chinese Medicine. Its properties of curing fever are well documented and still practiced today. We spoke of the current concept of curing cancer of which he strongly advised that there was no proof of, and that it was a myth. It is this myth he states, that has pushed the value of rhino horn to US$36,000 per kilogram amongst the traditional medicine community in Vietnam and put it out of reach of most practitioners, including himself. When the horn is used in medicinal practices, only tiny amounts of around one gram are used at a time. This would give a 7-kilogram horn 7000 applications. Or, as it's generally sold in 100 gram amounts, 100 applications to 70 patients.

According to Mr Be, it's become a status symbol, reserved exclusively for the rich, and in many cases, just displayed at home, not even being used as medicine. Since the mid-1990's Vietnam has gone from a relative non-player in East Asian markets to a significant player in the region. Language barriers restrict desire for Vietnamese to travel and instead, they prefer to remain at home, spending their rising disposable incomes on status-related goods and luxuries.

I asked Mr Be what he thought were some of the solutions we could offer people in Africa to help them understand that within TVM, rhino horn seemingly works and perhaps we should consider legalising the trade to supply the demand. “It’s a complicated problem at the moment. There needs to be research done on the effects of the horn when used in traditional medicine. There must be co-operation between both Asia and Africa in this research,” Be said. He thinks we should be farming the rhino to meet the demand of the Asian market. Be struggles to understand why this product can be taken without killing the animal, yet animals are being killed for it. I echoed my sentiments. I also couldn’t help wondering why there is such a lack of understanding in Africa about Eastern cultures use of products such as rhino horn, when we see such widespread use of ‘muti’, or traditional medicine in Africa.

Be went on to say, “Currently it’s only available to the very rich and is sometimes displayed in their home as a status symbol. The horn is only used as a last resort in traditional medicine. In general it’s not used as a daily treatment.” Finally he concluded, “If the rhino’s are farmed then there needs to be specific regulations and rules regarding the treatment of the animals. They should not be harmed in the process of farming or harvesting.” To me, protection also makes sense when one would want to harvest such a valuable commodity every three years. After two days, I left on good terms with Mr Be.

We constantly see and hear nowadays that rhino horn has been scientifically proven to have no medicinal qualities. This may be so in Western medicine, but for over 1000 years it has helped to regulate imbalances within Eastern medicine. If we start to understand the balances associated with Ying and Yang then we should see that certain components such as rhino horn, which may not make sense to Western medicine, could make perfect sense to a culture in which this philosophy is ingrained. If we now accept how intertwined this culture is with everyday society, we should appreciate that it is mostly unchangeable.

Hanoi

On arrival in Hanoi, the nations capital, I appreciate that I have already had a rare and privileged insight into the culture of TVM and the future of rhino horn use. My position of approach as someone involved with the industry as opposed to a reporter has paid off when needed. I now need to seek out case studies that draw comparisons to the current spike in rhino horn use, and also test the theory that horn is readily available within local markets.

Nguyen Van Quan & Douglas Hendrie are Wildlife Crime Unit & Investigations Advisors at Education for Nature in Vietnam (ENV). Doug has lived here for 14 year and both are very familiar with the trade and the culture of traditional medicine. They talk of the spike in rhino horn use within Vietnam as a possible fad. In the past, lucrative trades have existed with other commodities that were rare and exclusive. Bear bile, soft shell tortoise and deer antler wine trade were all previous examples of local wildlife commodities that have been through the spike in Vietnam that rhino horn use is currently going through. The use of these products was medicinal and culinary, but as we discovered, mostly status related. Regardless of whether something may work for cancer or fever is often irrelevant. Having rhino horn in possession, and even on display in ones home, distinguishes the owner within social circles. With these commodities though, previously as exclusive as rhino horn, once the market had been flooded, the price dropped and with it demand.

With substantial rhino horn stockpiles across the African continent, including 5 tons in Zimbabwe, one now wonders what would happen if they were released onto the market. If Zimbabwe was to sell its 5 tons at US$20,000 per kilogram, then they could in theory be looking at a US$100 million payment. South Africa has around 40 tons. If done in a controlled fashion and to multiple buyers to minimise further stockpiling, could the exclusivity drop, leading to market price reductions and in turn lessen consumer demand? Would this sale have the same affect on China's market?

The economics of rhino farming could possibly be similar to that of bear bile farming in that the animal needs to be kept alive, not killed. The opening of new farms was banned in Vietnam in 2005 and the trade has become much more regulated compared to what it was. Illegal activities still occur however, always without enough attention from the authorities. Although these farms are justifiably controversial, and extremely distressing, they are reported to be much more regulated with the micro-chipping of animal's mandatory and phase out plans being designed. The number of bears in captivity in Vietnam has slowly declined from 4500 to 3500 as the price of bile drops and the costs of maintaining the farms increase.

One of Doug's primary concerns within Vietnam if trade were to be legalised, would be how to regulate it. As with many developing countries, corruption is widely present in Vietnam and the concern of regulating wildlife trade is not at the forefront of everyone's mind. So what could this mean? Continued illegal killing of rhinos in Africa? The sale of imitation horn as is already happening on the streets in Asia, or perhaps the widespread breeding of rhinos across the country? Already in Vietnam there are 3 rhino farms with a total of 14 white rhino. What is the demand and what could Vietnam supply itself? These are questions that continually depend on each other. High demand and low supply will lead to increased prices, as we are witnessing, whereas high supply *could* lead to reduced demand and price. At the moment, I believe the market is only responding to the trade because the price continues to increase.

One primary fear is that the demand in rhino horn is too high and that the market, if legalized, could not be met. However, the amount required by the market is not fixed and will be dictated by demand. Demand is not determined by supply, but by what the consumer wants, which also determines price. Also, trade restrictions are most likely leading to stockpiling of horns within the black market, as uncertainty grows regarding the future of the rhino and the value of its horn. This could be pushing market demand for horn above what the actual demand may be.

After walking through downtown Hanoi I approach Lan Ong Street where all the traditional medicine markets are found. I travel through the markets and feel the eyes on me. Western reporters have been flocking here to point fingers, seek interviews and take photographs in recent months of the markets and the end sale point for rhino horn. I know this and bring out an iPhone and show the video of us dehorning rhino in Africa. At first I'm turned away with a polite shake of the head and a finger towards the door. At only the second shop I purchase 2 dishes that are used in Vietnam to grind the horn into a powder before it is diluted with water or alcohol to be consumed. The video works again. We ask if they have rhino horn for sale and she says she has. Whether she is convinced of my genuineness by the video of me holding a 5 kilo horn in my hand, or the purchase of the bowl, I don't know. She is however willing to sell me rhino horn there and then for a price of $7,500 per 100 grams or US$75,000 per kilo.

When Vietnamese are struggling with serious health issues and their current treatment regime is not working, their deep-rooted culture incites them to try anything and everything that may assist. I can't help but think, that if my young son or daughter was dying, that I myself wouldn't travel to the ends of the earth and beyond to help save them, or at least give hope. When people are desperate, there is a limit to the extent they may be concerned about issues that may seem important to the average Westerner. When life is on the line, where do we stop? Hope is what some components of traditional medicine give. Sometimes this is enough, others it is not, but the eternal conscious will always know that everything has been tried and the "what if" *elephant in the room* can be laid to rest with a loved one.

Summary

As highlighted by conservation economist Michael 't Sas-Rolfes, in 1993, the People's Republic of China gave in to political pressure from the USA and banned the use of rhino and tiger products in TCM. They were then removed from official use. In 2007, China held a workshop to discuss the re-opening a domestic legal trade in tiger products, supplied from captive breeding facilities, to meet medicinal demand for tiger bone. China is now an international super-power and unlikely to bow to the international demand to cease using traditional medicine containing endangered animals. At a 2011 CITES meeting, China refused to discuss the issue of how to reduce demand for rhino horn.

Delegates from Vietnam and China agree that farming animals endangered in the wild for their body parts, is a far more logical approach than the continued trend of killing them outright. But the average person on the street often struggles with this concept when we think of certain animals. If one was to walk through a Vietnamese market and see a chicken in a tiny cage or 100's of fish a fish in a tank waiting to purchased and taken home for dinner, they would most likely not give a second thought. But a few miles down the road there is a bear in a cage being milked for its bile and we become emotional. Why is this? Why do most of us subconsciously put a scaled value system on animal life and well-being? Is it based on size, remaining population or the 'sexy' factor? How would it be received if one put a hook through a rhino's mouth, dragged it across the ground behind a truck for 200 meters, picked it up and then threw it in a tank of water to drown? What's the difference between this and fishing? The difference is, we are used to fishing.

Many experts believe that animals have a higher system of morals than us humans, albeit a less developed one. Could the average person stand seeing a rhino in a small enclosure being kept alive for the harvest of its horn - similar to a zoo's enclosure but en mass? Is there a difference? Is this a better option than the extinction of a species because we couldn't stand to see it caged? The truth is that most humans will place self-preservation and life enjoyment over the death or discomfort of an animal. We struggle with the ethics of regulating human population with 7 billion people on the planet, but we're smart enough to de-sex our cats and dogs.

At the end of the day, whilst I struggle seeing animals in cages, I would struggle more knowing that they were extinct from the wild. If some rhinos must spend their lives in relative confinement so others can be free to survive in the wild, then the logic in me says this is better than total extinction. The argument into farming tigers is a fierce one, but there are stark differences in that the rhino horn is harvested, not killing the animal whereas the tiger is killed for its various parts.

China makes up 20% of the worlds population. Vietnam has almost 90 million citizens. Is the small army of conservationists fighting for the survival of this specie able to stand up forever against this

overwhelming and growing mass of rhino horn users? Or must we do what hurts us emotionally, but defines us logically and what many conservationists stand for – the survival of a species in the wild at any cost?

If some Asian's can express little compassion for captive animals in their own countries, then why should they care about a rhino's welfare on the other side of the planet? At the end of my travels I realise that it is not the Asians directly killing the rhino. They are happy to take the horn from animals dead or alive, wild or domestic. The rhino is being killed by people that sit behind desks on the other side of the world and decide that wildlife managers in Africa cannot utilise their own natural resources sustainably. They are fuelled by Facebook petitions signed by people who have never seen a rhino - sold on a one-liner about how things need to be done on the ground. The fact we are in this situation is absurd. A 35 year-old policy to prevent the use of a sustainable resource that increases in price and demand more and more every year that passes. Whilst the price goes up, the resources to defend these animals becomes increasingly limited.

To a landowner in South Africa that cannot utilise rhinos to attract tourists, the animal is a burden. Whilst having a realised value when sold, it is a constant target when living out its life in a protected park. Anti-poaching units can cost US$100's of thousands a year. Where is this money supposed to come from? Without sufficient protection, a landowner holding 10 rhino *may* lose 2-3 per year. With the harvesting of just one horn each year at the current market value the landowner can now invest what is needed into anti-poaching efforts and reduce the threat to the population. With the harvesting of 3 horns annually, they can buy more land and breed more rhino, and overall, protect more biodiversity.

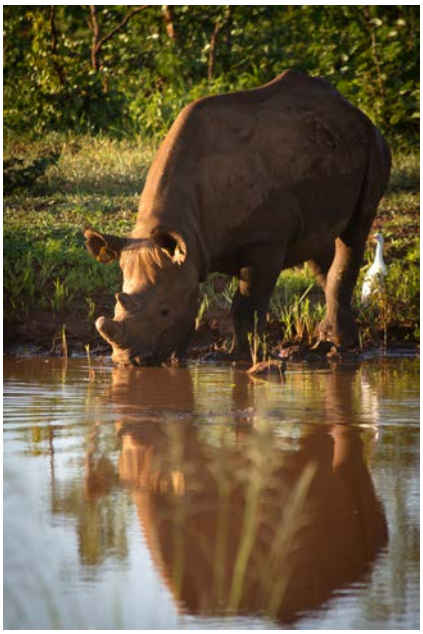
Africa's culture of hunting allows foreign tourists to come onto the continent and hunt the rhino to be taken home and mounted on a wall over a fireplace. This is currently acceptable behaviour, mostly sustainable, and laws protect it. Whilst this happens, many jump up and down at the thought of sustainably taking the horn off a living animal to be used in another cultures medicine.

Whilst this 'new' upsurge in Asia may be just a wave, do we have time to try and re-educate or wait for the wave to pass? Did such western education stop the flow of cocaine into the USA from South America, arms into Africa or change Middle-Eastern attitude towards women's rights? If George Clooney, Michael Jordan, Barrack Obama, Jennifer Lopez and Bill Gates all got up and said to American's that cocaine was bad, what effect would it have on sales and would these effects last? Can we really change Eastern beliefs and culture? Are we really on enough of a pedestal to do so, or are we just being arrogant? In the mind of an Asian it is we Westerners killing the rhino, as we will not create a system to give them the horn without killing the animal, when we actually could.

We talk about true conservation – but lets not forget what defines this - The preservation of a naturally functioning eco-systems. I personally don't remember ever seeing one to be honest. An area that is not early burnt, recovering from war, population controlled, re-forested, visited by tourists, researched, driven through, fenced and poached. Man is naturally a part of all eco-systems

and the world is now a smaller place. What man does on the other side of the planet can easily impact what happens in Africa's back yard. Manmade problems need manmade solutions. But what are the solutions to the rhino horn trade, and will they make it in time?

Really, at the end of it all it's a case of *damned if you do, and damned if you don't*. It's a sad but true point in history whereby the rhino must justify its existence, and by this I mean providing a horn for harvest. I think deep down CITES officials understand that at some stage it will have to be legalised to some extent. Whether this begins with a release of horns taken from natural deaths or not, only they know. Their concerns about corruption in Africa are well founded, but really, that's like heading to the beach and becoming frustrated with the sand.



For those that are completely against legalising the trade to any extent, I ask you this - Show us where the money is to protect these animals in the wild, and I'm back on your side. Until decisions are delivered from the CITES summit, the best options for the rhino that we know of, is well trained, well equipped units on the ground, backed up by good intelligence. Because of its current commercial value, I see the rhino as the hardest animal to protect in Africa. If we can succeed in protecting these animals then we know that everything in the surrounding ecosystem is safe from poaching.

Upon returning from Vietnam I am fortunate enough to spend a few days with Dr Ian Player - The man that led efforts to save the Southern White Rhino from extinction. Listening to the stories of struggle and success I see one thing is true - Conservation is, and must be, a life-long commitment. After six decades of hard work from Dr Player and his friends, I pray that the lessons they have given us are enough to carry on their work, one way or another.