

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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BLACK RHINO NOW ENDANGERED, VICTIM OF HUMAN VANITY, IGNORANCE, AND SUPERSTITION

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has listed the black rhinoceros as an endangered species in the July 14, 1980, Federal Register, in the hope of helping the nations of Africa preserve their rapidly dwindling herds. The move places further controls on importation and interstate commerce and enables the Service to assist in restoration efforts. But, perhaps most important, the ruling calls world-wide attention to the strange market that has literally put a price on the heads of all the estimated 14,000 remaining black rhinos.

Each black rhino has two horns on its snout, a large one far forward, and another smaller one directly behind. These bring enormous prices in parts of the East including South East Asia.

The horns, which are conically-shaped clusters of grown-together fibers, contain no bones, nor--according to the scientists--any medicinal value for humans.

Yet, ancient superstitions prove tenacious to the point that a Rangoon druggist may have on the same shelf with a bottle of buffered aspirin a bottle of Three Legs Brand Rhinoceros Horn Anti-Fever Water labeled:

"This medicine is carefully prepared from the best selected Rhinoceros Horn and Anti-Fever Drugs, and under the direct supervision of Experts. This wonderful medicine acts like a charm in giving immediate relief to those suffering from: Malaria, High Temperature, Fever affecting the Heart and Four Limbs, Against Climate Giddiness, Insanity, Toothache, etc."

Most of the rhino horns, and to a lesser extent, the hides and hooves, are sent to the Far East for such "medicinal" purposes. In India, however, the rhino horn is pulverized, made into a potion, and sold as an aphrodisiac.

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But during the 1970's, about 8,000 rhino horns were exported to North and South Yemen for an entirely different purpose. They were carved into dagger handles and handsomely inlaid with gems, coins, and silver filigree. The rhino-horn handled dagger, or jambia, is a status symbol almost no male over the age of 14 will be without.

Yemeni men have traditionally carried daggers, but in the past only a few sheiks could afford rhino-horn handles. Now, because of the wages laborers receive in Saudi Arabian oil fields, almost any man can afford that luxury. Depending on its quality, the going price of a rhino-horn hefted dagger ranges from \$300 to \$13,000.

These demands have resulted in heavy trade in the commodity during the last 10 years. The business, however, is not new. Rhino horns have been shipped around the Indian Ocean for at least 2,000 years. What's new is the price. While the market price of a pound of rhino horn was \$12 in 1969, its current price is \$350. Thus, an 8-pound horn brings \$2,800. A poacher would get about \$400 for such a horn.

Not surprisingly, during the last decade black rhino populations plummeted in large portions of its range. Kenya's black rhinos are believed to be down by 95 percent, Tanzania's, down 70 percent, with similar losses throughout Africa south of the Sahara.

The slow, lumbering, rhino is a remarkably easy target. Though its sense of smell and its hearing are keen, its eyesight is notoriously poor. In fact, it usually depends on the cries of tick birds, which are constant companions, for warning of approaching danger. Its defense has always been its formidable size (10 feet long, 5 feet high, and 3 tons in weight), and the awesome force of its charge. One is recorded to have dumped over a coach full of dignitaries; another derailed a locomotive. But the rhino is no match for a fast Land Rover and a high-powered rifle.

For all the aphrodisiac powers attributed to its horns, the rhino's reproductive rate is quite low. A single calf is normally born to a cow only once in 3 years. The calf requires 5 years to mature and begin its own reproductive cycle--if it can find a mate. Since the rhino is a solitary rather than a herd animal, it may never breed in areas where populations have been drastically thinned.

Its scientific name, Diceros bicornis, is derived from the Bicorn, the grotesquely fat, mythical beast that devoured virtuous husbands in Old English and French literature. But according to the Africans' own legends, the black rhinoceros is a great animal who has only two enemies, man and the mosquito.

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