

The Yemeni Rhino Horn Trade

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From the early 1970s to 1984 the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) imported almost half of all the rhinoceros horn put onto the world market. Its wholesale value in North Yemen was a total of approximately US\$10 000 000¹. Under pressure from various international organizations the government passed a law in 1982 which prohibited the import, but not the export, of rhino horn. Unfortunately, due to a variety of reasons (published elsewhere²), the government did not enforce this law. However, from 1980. to 1984 the quantity of horn imported dropped to a yearly average of about one and a half tonnes, compared with at least three tonnes in the 1970s. Although significantly less, one must remember that in 1970 there were about 65 000 black rhinos and by 1980 only 15 000 were left.³

The relatively open market in North Yemen makes this the single most threatening country to the conservation of the African rhinos. Consequently, I went back to the Yemen Arab Republic in late 1986 for the purpose of urging the government to take action to enforce the law against rhino horn imports, to implement additional legislation prohibiting the export of rhino horn and to encourage the use of substitutes for rhino horn in making dagger handles. Since my last visit to the country in 1984, there have been some very dramatic changes, especially in the economy which has slowed down from a 3% growth to an annual average of just 1.5% in 1985 and 1986. From a per capita point of view, this means that the economy has been going backwards at an average rate of minus 1.8% per year.⁴ Foreign remittances to banks in North Yemen from migrant workers (the main source of hard currency for the government) have declined from just over \$1 000 000 000 in 1984 to \$600 000 000 in 1986, mainly due to the economic recession in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States.

The government of North Yemen has been experiencing other economic difficulties, too. Foreign aid in the form of grants has declined from \$400000000 in 1982 to \$100000000 in 1986 because the two main donors, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, have had their own problems as a result of the decline in oil prices and the diversion of funds to the Iraqi-Iranian War.⁵ Another very serious economic problem in North Yemen is that of the limited value of the country's exports, which has remained at only about \$10000000 per annum for the past five years. In 1985 this was just one per cent of the total value of North Yemen's imports⁶ —a bizarre statistic! North Yemen's main exports are biscuits (around half the value of all its exports), fruits, hides and skins. Coffee exports, which used to be the country's main foreign exchange earner, fell from \$2 217 734 in the financial year 1969/70⁷ to a mere \$192 000 by 1980.⁸ This is because almost all the land suitable for growing coffee has been turned over to qat (**Catha edulis**) production, which is more profitable to the farmers but which is sold only domestically. In actuality, there are essentially no meaningful exports from North Yemen.

Given these predicaments, it is not surprising that the North Yemen government is very short of hard currency. Central Bank reserves have fallen from \$1 400 000 000 in 1980⁹ to \$322

000 000 in 1985.¹⁰ This state of affairs has, in turn, led to a sharp decline in the value of the rial in a very short period of time. From 1973 to 1983 the official exchange rate remained at 4.58 Yemeni rials for one US dollar. The unofficial rate was just slightly higher, and the money changers on the streets of Sanaa always had sufficient dollars for their customers. However, beginning in October, 1983, the rial began to depreciate; in December, 1985, the bank rate had fallen to 7.79 rials to the US dollar and by the end of November, 1986, the rate had dropped to 11.86. At the time of my arrival in North Yemen in early December, 1986, all the money changers' shops had been closed down by the government and even some of them had been imprisoned for overcharging for the purchase of US dollars, according to the government. At this time the market rate for one US dollar was 15 rials, due to a severe shortage of hard currency.

On top of all these serious economic problems has been the chronic smuggling of large quantities of goods, mainly consumer items, into the country.¹¹ The United States Embassy in Sanaa estimates that the total value of the economy, including the informal (smuggling) sector as well as the formal (legal) economy amounted to more than \$7000000000 in 1986, and of this total, \$350000000 was unrecorded remittances brought into the country and \$1 350 000 000 was the worth of goods smuggled in.¹² The majority of the smuggled items are brought in from Saudi Arabia overland, and include such items as food, electrical gadgets and clothes. Other commodities are brought in illicitly from the United Arab Emirates and, until recently, fuel and liquor were brought in by truck from South Yemen. In addition, there is the infamous liquor trade based in and around the port of Mocha, which relies on large quantities of beer and whisky purchased in Djibouti by Yemeni merchants and transported by **zarouk** (Yemeni dhows) to the beaches around Mocha. In October, 1986, a 0.75 litre bottle of Johnny Walker Whisky sold at Mocha for \$6.44; in Sanaa, in December, 1986, that same bottle of whisky retailed for \$31.50 due to the number of hands it had passed through, the bribes paid at roadblocks on the way to the capital and the profit demanded by the merchant who sold it.

The main incentive for smuggling goods into North Yemen is the avoidance of having to pay high government taxes on imports. In 1986 import duties on luxury goods were raised to 105%,¹³ and, moreover, it was almost impossible to obtain legal foreign exchange to pay for them. The government is well aware that large amounts of convertible currencies are not being brought back to North Yemen by the migrant workers and that they are being used to purchase consumer items in Saudi Arabia and other places and that these are eventually smuggled into North Yemen. Therefore, the government has tightened the controls at the Saudi Arabian frontier, and smuggling is now decreasing, but this has caused severe shortages of goods in the country. Some merchants have attempted to circumvent the controls by switching from large trucks to smaller pick-ups for transporting smuggled goods; with the smaller vehicles the transport costs are, of course, higher, but

they can more easily evade roadblocks in the desert.

While disastrous in many respects, North Yemen's economic decline has been beneficial to international conservation efforts to decrease the quantity of rhino horn brought into the country. From 1980 to 1984 about 1 500 kg were imported annually on average, and these were all illegal after August, 1982. In 1985 the quantity decreased to about one tonne, and for 1986 perhaps under 500 kg came in. Although the wholesale price in US dollars for the rhino horn has gone up only a little since 1984, in Yemeni rials it has more than doubled; in late 1986, a trader in Sanaa paid an importer between \$600 and \$1 000 per kg for rhino horn, depending upon its size and quality, compared with \$800 in 1984 for an average 1.5 kg horn. However, in rials, this meant that the price sky-rocketed from 4 300 to 10 000 rials per kg. On account of this very high price in rials, some of the craftsmen and consumers can no longer afford to buy rhino horn.

The main traders with whom I spoke said that for the best quality horn – which they believed was from a middle-aged rhinoceros possessing horns in good condition weighing in excess of 1.5 kg they would pay from \$800 to \$1 000 per kg. An acquaintance of mine in December, 1986, posed as a dealer and tried to obtain the equivalent of \$1 200 in rials for a kilogram of good quality horn, but could not. The main merchant in Sanaa, who claims that he handled between two-thirds and 80% of all the horn used in the Yemen Arab Republic until the mid-1980s, does not himself go to Africa to purchase it. Usually, Sudanese, Ethiopian and Kenyan importers, some of whom are of Yemeni origin, bring the horn to Sanaa, either by air or overland, and offer it to the merchant who pays them in rials, and then they exchange the rials for US dollars, using Yemeni money changers.

From 1980 to 1983, according to this merchant, the rhino horn came from the Sudan, Tanzania, Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia. A lot of it was brought into Sanaa by air, although some was carried by dhows from East Africa up to Djibouti and thence to the coast of the Yemen Arab Republic. In 1984 the horn came mostly from Tanzania, Somalia and India; the horn which came from India was smuggled out of East Africa. In 1985 and 1986 almost all the horn purchased by the largest merchant in Sanaa originated from the Sudan, but there were some small consignments from Ethiopia, also. The horn from the Sudan is exported illegally to Jeddah by Sudanese who have family connections in the Yemen. They arrange for it to be packed in large food sacks which contain rice, flour or sugar, and brought to Sanaa clandestinely.

Aside from the most prominent trader, there are several others involved in buying rhino horn. Some of these told me that they have obtained their most recent supplies from Kenya, India and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The UAE connection has become a very important one in the past few years. Large quantities of rhino horn originating from dead rhinos in Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Mozambique have been exported illegally to Burundi, but this trade in Burundi is, apparently, not illegal and it brings in much-needed convertible currency. There is a group of merchants in the capital, Bujumbura, most of whom are Somalis, Senegalese and Malians, who handle all types of animal products for re-export, including elephant ivory, leopard skins and rhino horns, plus gold, diamonds and other valuable merchandise. Ian Parker, who spent some time in Bujumbura in September, 1986, confirmed to me that large amounts of rhino horn are **available there**: he personally saw at least one tonne comprising 700

pieces ready to leave the country. Most of the horn shipped out of Burundi goes by air on the weekly Ethiopian Airlines flight to Addis Ababa; from there it is sent on another Ethiopian Airlines plane to Dubai where it is re-packed and put onto trucks which go overland through the Saudi Arabian Empty Quarter to the relatively unpatrolled eastern boundary of North Yemen. Apparently, some of the rhino horn in Bombay is also moved into the UAE for transshipment to Sanaa through the desert. It is because customs controls at the Sanaa airport have been tightened that rhino horn from the UAE is now being sent into the country overland.

One trader told me that some diplomats in African countries send rhino horn in diplomatic pouches to their embassies in Sanaa for sale. This is in addition to the rather well-known fact that a particular eastern Asian communist country has had its diplomats involved in clandestine rhino horn trade for several years; the diplomats from that country deal in horn from poached rhinos in Zimbabwe and Zambia. I have myself seen a confiscated consignment of theirs. They trade in rhino horn for the purpose of obtaining convertible currencies, and they never send the horn back to their own country (where, in fact, there is a certain demand for it as a medicine) because their government considers rhino horn a luxury item which the people can do without – and it is much more important to conserve scarce foreign exchange for necessities. This is the same reason why rhino horn daggers are no longer made in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen), which also has a Marxist government and foreign exchange is unavailable to traders.

On this most recent trip to North Yemen, I found another piece to the jigsaw puzzle of the rhino horn trade. In the 1970s shavings left over from the carving of rhino horn handles were exported to Hong Kong, but when the Crown Colony began conforming to the principles of CITES in 1979, this trade stopped.¹⁴ In the early 1980s a Chinese in Sanaa began sending them to mainland China for use in patent medicines. Now, South Koreans have entered the market for rhino horn shavings in Sanaa, and although there are Koreans from both North and South Korea working in the Yemen Arab Republic, I believe it is only the South Koreans who are buying them. In 1985 one craftsman sold his shavings for \$139 (1 000 rials) per kg to Yemeni middlemen and "Orientals", but in 1986 he received \$227 (2 200 rials) per kg for them. The largest trader in rhino horn in Sanaa sold his shavings for \$253 per kg in December, 1986, to a Chinese.

All the craftsmen working on dagger handles complained to me that the rial price of rhino horn has increased so much since 1984 that they cannot make a worthwhile profit when they sell them to retailers. Consumer resistance to the higher prices has made it more and more difficult to sell the djambias, especially because the recession has taken its toll on the middle class, the former potential buyers who are no longer in a position to purchase expensive daggers. Yet the craftsmen are also complaining that it is becoming "almost impossible" to replenish their supplies of rhino horn; some of that now being used is from earlier stockpiling.

The main trader in rhino horn in North Yemen is now in his eighties, and, with some of his family members, owns today a total of seven dagger-making stalls and nine retail shops. He was carving dagger handles from rhino horn in the 1930s, but he said that in those days there were also daggers imported from the Sunday, Kenya, Tanzania and India. After North Yemen's Revolution and Civil War this merchant began pur-

chasing large quantities of rhino horn and from the mid-1970s until the end of that decade he bought about 3 000 kg of rhino horn per year, much of which he admitted originated from Kenya. His employees made almost 6000 daggers with rhino horn handles a year then; very few djambias were made with cheaper handles since the demand for "the best" was so great that it could hardly be met; there was neither time nor particular incentive for the carvers to work in other materials.

The situation is now quite different, and although the merchant's business has continued to grow, less than 2 400 daggers with rhino horn handles were made in his workshops in 1986, but some 24 000 with cheaper handles were produced by him. The wholesale price of rhino horn, which increased sharply after 1977, encouraged the use of substitutes first, then the various restrictions imposed on the export of rhino horn from source countries in Africa and the passing of the North Yemeni law prohibiting legal import of rhino horn further led to a higher and higher percentage of the daggers being made with water buffalo horn handles, not just by this merchant, but others as well. One craftsman has, in fact, introduced plastic handles (\$9 to \$17 each wholesale) because he thinks that water buffalo horn, which is only \$400 a tonne imported from India, is now too difficult to obtain with the problems of trying to wrangle an import licence for it. With rhino populations continuing to fall in Africa, several governments are becoming very concerned and are putting more effort into rhino conservation and into law enforcement against the export of rhino horn. Supply is, therefore, likely to continue to decline, so despite major successes in lowering the demand for it in eastern Asia, its wholesale price may remain roughly the same in the near future. While high prices in the late 1970s encouraged poaching, they may now be beginning to have the opposite effect because of the steadily decreasing demand and the realization on the part of government authorities of the very real need to protect the small remaining numbers of rhinos – less than 4 500 black rhinos are thought to live in the wild today.¹⁵

Westernization of the elite in North Yemen, which was an encouraging factor for the lowering of the demand for rhino horn two years ago, is slowing down due to the economic recession, but this is not as worrisome as we might have expected because people are accepting daggers with water buffalo horn and plastic handles today. Interestingly, the numbers of workshops and numbers of craftsmen in the dagger-making section of the Sanaa souq increased from 41 and 61 in 1984¹⁶ to 51 and 84, respectively, by December 1986, when I made my latest survey.

Today, plain daggers without rhino horn handles sell from \$13 upwards, and those with rhino horn handles (excluding scabbard) vary in price from \$170 to \$845; the cheaper daggers have very small rhino horn handles and are not very popular because, traditionally, a small handle on a dagger indicated that the owner was of a lower caste. Outside Sanaa, daggers with rhino horn handles are no longer being made in North Yemen. Some people have thought that they were produced in the southern part of Saudi Arabia where there are some Saudis of Yemeni origin, but this is not true and those who have such daggers have purchased them in North Yemen.

From August, 1982, when North Yemen prohibited imports of rhino horn, until the end of 1986, approximately five tonnes of rhino horn were smuggled into the country, representing the deaths of a least 1 735 rhinos,¹⁷ or 45% of the remaining black rhinos in Africa now. When I met Dr. Abdul al-Iryani, the Deputy

Prime Minister of North Yemen, on 13 December 1986, the American ambassador to North Yemen, William Rugh was present. He told the Deputy Prime Minister, who is also the Minister of Foreign Affairs and holds a Ph.D. from Yale University in zoology, that the American government is extremely concerned about rhino horn imports into North Yemen and referred several times to the Congressional Hearing on the Rhinoceros¹⁶ in which it had been strongly suggested that the U.S.A. government's foreign aid appropriations to North Yemen, amounting to \$35 000 000 a year, should be reduced if the North Yemen government did not put more effort into stopping this trade. The British ambassador, David Tatham, was also at the meeting with Dr. Abdul al-Iryani and he pointed out that Her Britannic Majesty's government was equally concerned over the matter. In addition Brian Goldbeck, Economic Officer at the United States Embassy, and Lucy Vigne from the African Wildlife Foundation were present. I stated that the international press corps wanted to expose North Yemen as the main culprit of rhino conservation, but I had managed to fend off interviews on the subject pending the outcome of this meeting. Dr. al-Iryani was not only sympathetic to the problem, he was well informed about the imports and even knew the main trader by name. He was eager to work out some permanent solutions with us. Moreover, he assured me that other senior members of the North Yemen government would co-operate in initiating action to curtail rhino horn imports. The meeting lasted for about 45 minutes, and by the end of it we had drawn up a six-point strategy which Dr. al-Iryani promised to have implemented by the end of January, 1987:

- (1) The Customs Department would encourage water buffalo horn imports (as a substitute for rhino horn) by eliminating all duties on it.
- (2) The government would issue a decree prohibiting the export of rhino horn shavings.
- (3) Both the Prime Minister and Dr. al-Iryani would appeal to the main trader to desist from importing rhino horn.
- (4) The government would request the Grand Mufti to issue a **fatwa** (religious edict), stating that it is against the will of God for man to eliminate an animal species, which is what is happening as a result of Yemenis continuing to insist on having daggers with rhino horn handles; the edict would be supported by quoting an appropriate passage from the Koran.
- (5) Although less than 5% of the daggers are now made with rhino horn handles, the government would persuade craftsmen in the souq to stop using it entirely.
- (6) Dr. al-Iryani would talk to the President of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Zayid, in late December, 1986, when he was scheduled to arrive in Sanaa on an official visit, about the need to ban rhino horn imports from his country.

Following the meeting with the Deputy Prime Minister, I then went to see the Minister of Economy, Mohamed al-Khadam al-Wajih, also accompanied by the British and American ambassadors and by Brian Goldbeck and Lucy Vigne. Mr. al-Khadam al-Wajih agreed with the six points and promised that his Ministry would fully support them. He further suggested that since each dagger workshop in the Sanaa souq has to be officially licensed, the government could threaten to withdraw or refuse to renew licences to those in which the craftsmen persist in using rhino horn for handles. This could be the most forceful means of stopping the carving of rhino horn in North Yemen, and I fully support it. However, I do not want to see the craftsmen lose their jobs making djambias, and I feel that they

should be strongly encouraged to try making dagger handles out of other high quality materials so that this artistic and cultural tradition of long standing is not denigrated. I stressed this to the Minister of Economy.

Before I left North Yemen, Dr. al-Iryani telephoned me at the hotel where I was staying in Sanaa, to tell me about further discussions he had held with Mohamed al-Khadam al-Wajih. Together, they had decided that dagger workshop licences would only be re-issued under the condition that each of the craftsmen employed would sign an affidavit promising not to use rhino horn. When the licences have been re-issued and a craftsman is caught working rhino horn, the licence for that particular workshop will be withdrawn. Dr. al-Iryani said that this regulation would be put into effect by the end of January, 1987.

If this does come to pass, and if the other points of North Yemen's proposed strategy to curtail the making of daggers with rhino horn handles are enacted, then the country which has been more directly responsible than any other for abetting African rhino poaching will cease to be a problem to rhino conservationists.

I am most appreciative of the support I received from the British and American ambassadors in Sanaa, which rendered it possible for me to meet with the Deputy Prime Minister and other members of the North Yemen government, and I am greatly encouraged by the widespread interest and concerted efforts being taken to stop the rhino horn trade. Certainly, I am more optimistic than I have been since I first started studying the problems of rhino conservation – almost ten years ago – about future prospects for rhino in Africa.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following organizations for supporting our trip to North Yemen: African Wildlife Foundation, WWF-International, African Fund for Endangered Wildlife, New York Zoological Society and the International Trust for Nature Conservation.

Table1. Quantities and values of rhino horn purchased by the main trader in Sanaa, Yemen Arab Republic, 1980-1986.

Year	Kg	Price paid per kg		Exporting Countries
		Rials	Dollars	
1980	1 050	3 500	764	Tanzania, Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia
1981	1 320	3 500	764	India, Tanzania, Ethiopia and Sudan
1982	1 585	3 600	786	Tanzania, Ethiopia and Sudan
1983	1 120	4 100	891	India, Kenya and Sudan
1984	1 058	4 300	796	Tanzania, Somalia and India
1985	475	8 300	1150	Ethiopia and Sudan
1986*	100	10000	1032	Sudan

*Up to 12 December 1986.

Source:personal records kept by the trader.

NOTES:

1. This figure is based on estimates of the amount of rhino horn brought into North Yemen each year, multiplied by the landed cost of the

horns in U.S. dollars.

2. Martin, E.B. (1984). North Yemen and the rhino horn trade today *Swara*, 7 (2): 29-33; Martin, E.B. (1985). Rhinos and daggers: a major conservation problem. *Oryx*, 19 (October 1985): 198-201.
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4. U.S.A. Department of commerce (1986). Foreign Economic Trends and Their Implications for the United States: North Yemen Republic. American Embassy Sanaa, Washington D.C. (November 1986 in press).
5. U.S.A. Department of commerce (1986). As in 4.
6. Yemen Arab Republic (1986). Statistical Yearbook 1985. central Planning Organisation, Sanaa. p. 187.
7. Yemen Arab Republic (1973). Central Bank of Yemen Annual Report 1972-73. Central Bank, Sanaa. p. 152.
8. Yemen Arab Republic (1984). Central Bank of Yemen 13th Annual Report. Central Bank, Sanaa. p. 126.
9. U.S.A. Department of Commerce (1986). Foreign Economic Trends and Their Implications for the united States: Yemen Arab Republic. American Embassy Sanaa, Washington D.C. (March 1986). p. 3.
10. U.S.A. Department of Commerce (1986). As in 4.
11. J.D. Orr (First Secretary, Commercial — British Embassy Sanaa). Economic Roundup — Yemen Arab Republic. Typescript prepared by British Embassy, Sanaa (1 October 1986).
12. U.S.A. Department of Commerce (1986). As in 4.
13. U.S.A. Department of Commerce (1986). As in 4.
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15. Cumming, D. (1986). Chairman's report. *Pachyderm*, No. 6:1.
16. Martin, E.B. (1984). As in 2.
17. This figure is calculated from the total amount of horn imported into North Yemen over the period, divided by the average weight of a pair of horns on an East African black rhino (2.88 kg).
18. U.S.A. House of Representatives, Washington D.C. Committee on Science and Technology (Sub-committee on Natural Resources, Agriculture, Research and Environment). James Scheuer, Chairman. 25 September, 1986.

This modern rhino horn jambia was on sale for U.S.\$600 in December 1986.



Raising A Baby Rhino