
Yemen Stops Being a Major Buyer of Rhino Horn

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Four years had elapsed since our last survey of the trade in North Yemen proved rhino horn was still being imported into the country despite the 1982 ban - albeit down to some 500kg from the average 3,000 kg per annum bought in the 1970s. During our October, 1990, visit we found out what has happened to Yemen's rhino horn trade today.

Along two dark alleyways of the old souk in Yemen's capital city, Sanaa, we still found hilts for daggers being carved from African rhino horn. On our first afternoon there, before suspicions of our investigations were aroused, we watched two dagger craftsmen at work in separate workshops, one sandpapering a rhino horn handle in the early stages of making, and the other, with great care, polishing an almost completed hilt. We were told, quite openly, that these were made from rhino horn. They were indeed a paler brown than the common water buffalo horn hilts and we could see the distinctive hair follicles which create a granular effect within the handle. Another craftsman even beckoned us into his workshop and unlocked a small cupboard to show us proudly two full African horns and five rhino horn hafts in the process of being carved.

The last remaining rhino horn trader in the souk told our interpreter that he had been buying about 20 kg of rhino horn annually, usually from returning Yemeni Ethiopians or Sudanese immigrants, for US\$ 1,360 a kilo for a large horn weighing up to five kg. He blamed conservationists for having virtually put an end to rhino horn smuggling. We found that of 87 dagger makers we counted in the souk, two or three were at work on rhino horn each day. As it takes two and a half days to complete one handle, we estimated that about 120 kg of horn (the equivalent of about 40 rhinos) are carved a year, less than a quarter the amount used in the mid-1980s. Some of this is no doubt from old stocks, but by no means all.

Yemen is undergoing an economic recession. This is due to large cut-backs in donor aid following the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq, and, since then of course, because of the war against Iraq. It is also due to the loss of lucrative jobs in Saudi Arabia by more than 700,000 Yemenis who had to return home because of new Saudi restrictions imposed after the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990. With rising inflation and devaluation of the local currency, the trade in rhino horn daggers has suffered. Not only is rhino horn more expensive to buy, but Taiwanese traders will pay 50% more for it than their Yemeni counterparts, making it very difficult for the Yemenis to compete. Also, Indian water buffalo horn is hard to import due to lack of foreign exchange. Resourceful craftsmen are carving many more hilts from plastic, a substitute that was introduced only in the mid-1980s and has proved



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The Sanaa souk where most of Yemen's jambiyahs are made, is situated in the old town, unique with its traditional architecture



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In 1990, a craftsman in Sanaa souk displayed two full black rhino horns for us to see and reluctantly let us photograph them

extremely popular with poor Yemenis and tourists. In the town of Dhamar, the handful of craftsmen remaining in business have started to use cheap camel hooves as their raw material.

Yemen's economic crisis cannot be relied upon to hinder the rhino horn trade for very long as more oil is likely to be discovered in the country in the near future. It is vital to reduce further the demand for rhino horn hilts. This is especially so as more Yemenis than ever before are wearing jambiyahs south of Sanaa, emulating the traditions and fashion of that power centre. It is also possible, since unity, that Yemenis in the far south may follow this trend.

With all this in mind, we had meetings with the Minister of State and the Foreign Minister, kindly arranged for us by the British and American ambassadors. Both ministers were anxious to eliminate the last trickle of rhino horn trade in Yemen in order to aid the recovery of rhino numbers in Africa and also to improve the country's image on this sensitive conservation issue. A new Environmental Protection Council has been formed in Yemen, which is a very positive step for conservation in the region. It was agreed that the Council, which is chaired by the Minister of State, would hold a meeting with the traders and dagger craftsmen to discuss the problems of the rhino horn trade. The Foreign Minister said he would talk to the Governor of the Central Bank about allocating hard currency to enable traders to import water buffalo horn to help the dagger industry with this cheap substitute. Perhaps most importantly, the government is to ask the principal trader, who is well known in Sanaa, to carry out a stock-take of his rhino horn. If the government marked these horns individually, inspected the stock regularly and gave a time limit within which it must be sold, the trader would be prevented from mixing new illegal horns in with old supplies and indefinitely claiming to be dealing in legal stock. We wait to hear if this action is underway. We are fairly confident that these measures will be carried out, since an action-plan we drew up in late 1986 for the government was nearly all effected despite economic and political pressures on the government.

Perhaps the most effective way of curtailing demand for rhino horn is with the help of Yemen's highly respected Grand Mufti, the spiritual leader of this very religious country. In what was very nearly our last hour in Sanaa, the American ambassador brought us to meet this venerable figure in his traditional house in the old town. He was extremely willing to help us and agreed to issue a *fatwa*, or religious edict, which could be published in the newspapers, stipulating that it is against God's will to cause the extinction of an animal



The granular-look, as shown in this dagger hilt, is very popular and reveals the origin to be rhino horn

species, specifically the rhinoceros.

We left Yemen with high hopes that if these final efforts are implemented by the government and the Grand Mufti, the trade in rhino horn in the country would almost be wiped out, but not at the expense of the dagger industry, a unique element in the cultural heritage of Yemen and one which is very likely to live on in that country of many ancient traditions.



A retailer displays his shining daggers to potential buyers in Sanaa souk