

LAURINE CROES Contributing writer

HORNS OF A DILEMMA

South Africa's move to legalize domestic trade in rhino horn sparks conservation debate

JOHANNESBURG Rhino horn went on sale legally in South Africa in August for the first time after a court lifted a domestic trade ban in April. But many expect much of the horn to find its way to East Asia illegally, even though South Africa says it remains committed to a worldwide ban on international trading.

The first legal auction took place online from Aug. 23 to 25 after official permits were granted to John Hume, the country's largest private rhino breeder. An in-person auction is scheduled for Sept. 19. Hume advertised 264 horns online, weighing almost 500 kg, but accused the Department of Environmental Affairs of causing intentional delays that hit his profits. A last-minute legal challenge by the DEA postponed Hume's first auction, after claims that his permit was issued by the wrong government

official. However, on Aug. 20 the High Court in Pretoria ordered the DEA to issue a pre-approved permit.

The decision to lift the ban, by South Africa's Constitutional Court, has sparked concerns that a legal domestic trade will provide trafficking loopholes for horns destined for markets such as China, Laos and Hong Kong, the three main destinations for horns smuggled out of South Africa. On Aug. 12, Hong Kong Customs seized 2.6kg of "suspected rhino horn," with an estimated market value of \$67,000, from an airline passenger arriving from Johannesburg.

Many conservationists and activists attacked the decision to allow Hume's auctions to proceed, fearing a legal trade will encourage poachers, fuel demand for Asian medical potions using horn, and enrich private breeders.



TOP: John Hume is caring for orphan rhinos Pablo and Picasso on his ranch in Klerksdorp, South Africa.

BOTTOM LEFT: The skull of a rhino killed for her horn on Lynne MacTavish's private farm near Johannesburg. The rhino's baby calf died afterward of starvation.

BOTTOM RIGHT: John Hume

But Hume said the money raised by the auctions was essential for the survival of the endangered species.

"If I don't sell rhino horn, in 10 years' time my rhinos will all be dead. I bet my bottom dollar on that," said Hume, adding that anti-poaching security measures at his rhino breeding operation near Klerksdorp, a short drive from Johannesburg, amount to "more than half" his running costs.

Official statistics from the DEA show that 1,054 rhinos were killed by poachers in 2016 -- nearly three a day on average. The world's rhino population has reached a critical low point. There are fewer than 50,000 left in the wild, according to estimates by Save the Rhino, a charity.

Save the Rhino said there is no South African demand for horn, and warned that the auctions could attract bidders



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intending to smuggle horns to Asia. The demand for rhino horn stems mainly from traditional Chinese medicine. Horn, made up of the protein keratin, is believed to cure conditions ranging from headaches to cancer, despite a lack of scientific evidence.

STATUS SYMBOL Rhino horn is also considered a symbol of status and wealth in some parts of East Asia, and is sometimes used to close business deals. These practices have had a devastating effect on the South African rhino, which is threatened with extinction.

Hume owns the world's biggest private rhino-breeding farm, with more than 1,000 rhinos roaming 8,000 hectares of land -- an area almost the size of Manhattan. He led the legal challenge that ended the trade ban, and advocates

"sustainable utilization" of rhino horn that can be harvested and supplied to a controlled and legal market, bringing down the price and undercutting the illegal trade.

"Do you know how our poaching started?" said Hume. "In the late nineties, our government was awarding permits to the Vietnamese to kill our rhino. You could get maybe 8kg or 9kg of horn off an average rhino that you shot. I always said: 'How can you be that stupid? Why don't you let the rhino live happily ever after, cut off his horn, he doesn't miss it, he doesn't need it, and in his lifetime of 40-odd years he will give you 60, 70 or maybe even 80 kilos of horn. Why do you want to kill him for eight?'"

Groups such as Save the Rhino and the International Fund for Animal Welfare expect poaching to increase

now the market is legalized, as they say happened with elephant poaching after a one-off ivory auction in 2008 stimulated demand in Asia.

PANDORA'S BOX

Harvesting ivory always kills elephants, while rhinos can live without their horns. But the ivory crisis has sparked fears that rhino horn will become an investment for poaching syndicates in the early stages of legal trading. "It will be like opening Pandora's Box, and it cannot be undone, devastating a species already threatened with extinction," said a ranger at South Africa's Pilanesberg National Park, who wished to remain anonymous.

In a bid to prevent foreign traffickers from buying horn, all buyers need to have a residence permit and a South African address. "All domestic trade in rhino

horn will be subjected to the issuance of the relevant permits in terms of the National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act, and applicable provincial legislation," said Albi Modise at the DEA.

Bidders have offered around the same price as on the black market, according to Hume's lawyer, Izak du Toit, who said estimated prices quoted in the media were "horribly inflated." The identities of the buyers and profits of the auction were not revealed.

"We don't know who the buyers are, and we are not required by law to ask," said Du Toit. He said he thinks buyers are likely to be investors and businessmen hoping that the next meeting of the signatories of CITES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, to be held in two or three years' time, will loosen restrictions on the international horn trade.

For Hume, the ideal outcome of legal trading in horn is that rhinos will become more valuable alive than dead, encouraging conservationists to reinvest in the species and create breeding programs.

"If it works, said Hume, "I will save more than half of my running costs and I can go back to what I did 20 years ago, which was leave my horns on my rhinos, breed rhinos, sell them to game reserves, zoos and game parks at a profit to breed more rhino." **N**