



RhiNOremedy attended this debate to hear arguments put forward for and against a legal trade in endangered species including tiger (bone), elephant (ivory) and rhino (horn). This is a contentious issue and one which divides opinion and leaves others uneasy about a decision either way. The legalisation approach is one which recently, continues to surface and which South Africa in particular is pushing for in relation to rhino horn. They will put forward their case at the next CITES convention in 2016, where decisions will be made, for now it is important for the main arguments for and against to be understood.

This debate provided an opportunity for interested parties and the media to listen to opinions from scientists and conservationists behind the notion of legalisation and those against it. Box 1 lists the panel that took part in the debate. The audience included conservation organisation representatives, scientists, students and the public, and consisted of over 700 in the room, and more than 200 online. We have compiled some of the panel's thoughts, and reflected on some of the arguments put forward.

Pro Trade

Box 1: The Panel

Pro-Trade

Dr Duan Biggs: postdoctoral research fellow at the Australian Research Council's Centre of Excellence for Environmental Decisions at the University of Queensland.

Kirsten Conrad: Singapore-based conservation policy analyst, member of the IUCN CEESP/SSC Sustainable Use and Livelihoods Specialist Group (SULi)

Michael 't Sas-Rolfes: Independent conservation economist, interest in the role of markets for biodiversity conservation.

Against Trade

Dr. Glyn Davies: WWF executive director of global programmes

Dr. Katarzyna Nowak: Postdoctoral research fellow at Durham University, U.K., and the University of the Free State, Qwaqwa, South Africa.

Mary Rice: Executive director of the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA)

It was made clear by the pro-trade team that the current strategy to protect species threatened by illegal trade is failing. Dr Biggs introduced the situation with rhino in South Africa and in particular Kruger National Park where he stated all resources for conservation are now allocated to anti-poaching and rhino numbers are still declining faster than thought. Rhino have been used for millennia and now the crisis is due to a rise in black market trade. Dr Biggs explained that trade bans act to restrict supply, increase prices when the reverse is needed, and cause a subsequent increase in poaching. With rhino horn, it can be harvested humanely without the death of the animal, the trade ban prevents this approach. It is thought that the estimated value of rhino poached in South Africa in recent years is \$1/2 billion, this is revenue that could go to conservation. Dr Biggs stated that a legal trade should be considered as one of the policy options for conservation. Throughout the evening, the success stories of vicuna and crocodile trade, which resulted in increasing populations, were presented by Dr Biggs as comparable and a valid precedent or model for which rhino horn trade could be established.

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...the reason to save wildlife is because it is useful to humans.

Kirsten Conrad added to the pro-trade argument by stating that in Asia the reason to save wildlife is because it is useful to humans. For the tiger, trade bans have not worked, and a chart showed the audience how tiger populations have fallen despite the introduction of the trade ban. Kirsten continued that is irrelevant to disprove the effectiveness of any medicine and that it is irresponsible and is prolonging suffering of targeted species by not considering other options.

Michael 't'sas Rolfes explained that this complex situation requires more thinking than a limited prohibition approach. The environments where these particular species occur are dominated by humans in social need, it is these people that require incentives to conserve and it is their needs that should be taken into account. Trade bans take control away from local people, they will always be undermined, trade bans are 'antiques' and a top down approach which are confrontational to the problem Michael explained.

We already have farms (e.g. rhinos live in China and Vietnam, and ranches in South Africa), there is unproven behaviour change in consumer countries and all the political will in the world has failed to control the illegal drug trade. Michael introduced a two-fold approach to trading in endangered species 1: to generate revenue for conservation, 2: to generate an upward price pressure to make the end use less desirable.

... .generate revenue for conservation....
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Against Trade

The team against the idea of legalising trade in endangered species were not in denial of the fact that there is a huge problem and that there are failings in the systems in place to prevent illegal trade – however these failings were the lack of enforcement of existing laws and regulations, not that these systems were ineffective when implemented properly. All agreed that it is imperative to focus on enforcing existing regulations and on conservation efforts in-situ and not waste time and dilute such efforts by working on such a high risk idea of a legal trade for such precariously situated species.

... imperative to focus on enforcing existing regulations

The arguments for trade stem from economic rhetoric and assumptions.

The arguments for trade stem from economic rhetoric and assumptions, Dr Novak explained. Human do not behave the way models predict, they choose which products to pursue, and as it stands it is impossible to police the markets including the internet – an illegal trade would still exist. Dr Novak explained that for these long lived, large bodied species that are slow to reproduce, any ‘manufacturing rate’ could not be increased quickly (as opposed to crocodiles which can lay hundreds of eggs a time). Also, these species should be conserved within their functioning ecosystems, not driven to ecological extinction with their existence confined to farms and ranches. There is lack of clarity on who the market is, and there will be guaranteed buyers and traders who would stockpile, banking on extinction.

Controlling supply does not control the end markets.

Vietnam and China have failed to enforce existing laws which is helping to drive illegal trade further. Dr Novak was clear that controlling supply simply does not control the end markets. There are issues with the chain of custody and compliance, and how do you accurately identify an honest legal from a dishonest illegal supply? The only way to police every piece is to make trade fully illegal, and the way forward is through demand reduction.

The commodities spoken of here are expensive and rare, prices are inelastic and difficult to control, economic markets are unpredictable stated Glyn Davies. The risks are high with such a strategy, if it was to go ahead the errors cannot be corrected before the damage is done. There is a need for good information to develop markets and manage them effectively, information we do not have. Glyn explained that the current crisis is fuelled by new elements and non-traditional uses and it is this which has caused the demand surge. For a legal trade, the supply is

A regulated trade will support illegal activity.

simply not sufficient for the large market forces, and such a trade involves criminal syndicates and those banking on extinction. The example of the past ivory sales and the permitting system bought in to identify legal stock was highlighted by Glyn, this failed, black markets now forge the ID cards. A regulated trade will support illegal activity, Glyn used the example of tiger skins to highlight the fact that illegal ‘wild’ sources are considered better and are cheaper than skins from tiger farms. The audience was reminded of conservation success stories including rhino conservation in Nepal which has achieved population increases and almost zero poaching, and the fact that some countries requested a complete trade ban as regulations are too difficult to enforce. The priority must be real conservation.

Illegal “wild” sources are considered better and are cheaper than skins from tiger farms.

The stark reality was highlighted by Mary Rice, there is already a trade, and this is the problem. Markets stimulate demand and by opening such a market for such rare species will generate irreversible impacts. There are no good arguments for a legal trade, just economic speculation and a decision for South Africa to trade will impact on other countries and continents.

Farming has not worked, Mary highlights the facts about tigers and farmed products stimulated the demand for wild tiger products. Controlled trade has not worked, Mary highlights the facts about the failure to manage the ivory trade from the legal sales of stockpiled ivory. Traders abuse the system, permits systems are widely abused, and how can you really tell illegal from legal sources? Mary explains that an effective trade ban is the most straightforward approach “see it, confiscate it, prosecute”. Finally, 40 years ago the ivory trade was out of control, bans were put in place, elephant populations began to recover, bans work when implemented.

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Reflections

Opinions differ – even in the RhiNOremedy family!

Sustainable use and a legal trade is seen as a viable option by some but not others. A common denominator though is the vital need for control and enforcement of regulations. This is a requirement for both a legal and/or an illegal trade – regulations have to be enforced and trading partners have to comply. There is certainly not a good track record of either. Below are some thoughts and queries following the debate, we would love to hear your thoughts too (info@rhinoremedy.org)

Is it ethical to condone the supply of substances used for medicines, including to “cure cancer”, even though they are incapable of doing so?

Vicuna products are not used to cure global health issues including cancer! – the demand is an entirely different animal - much the same as the example!

Legal trade – a perfectionists solution in an imperfect world?

Buyers will stockpile – illegal trade will be fuelled

A high priced legal supply would create the opportunity for undercutting by illegal means, and create an improved supply route

An outright ban would be easier to control, particularly at the current time when the situation is becoming dangerously out of control, but how do we cope with potential increasing prices?

Tackling trade routes for wildlife products will help tackle the linked routes for global issues such as the drugs and arms trade

There is the belief that “wild” sourced products are superior – this could be exacerbated by a stimulated demand

Fact - Captive farmed animals will suffer, especially in the consumer countries

Has South Africa been planning legal trade for longer than realised? There are farms already in progress in South Africa, and Asia after live sales from South Africa to China and Vietnam

Demand in Vietnam is causing a surge in rhino poaching - Vietnam is a new market that has not been a priority for past demand reduction efforts, responding efforts are now in their early stages

There is decades of evidence of the efficacy of campaigns resulting in behaviour change
e.g. WWF 1980s campaign promoting Saiga antelope horn as an alternative the rhino horn (Saiga is now endangered), WildAID’s work to reduce demand for shark fin soup, China making use of rhino horn in TCM prohibited)

“In Asia, the reason to save wildlife is that it is useful” **Other countries assets do not belong to anyone but them.**

Fashions are fads....there will be new status symbols

Is it true that trade bans do not work? Would any of these species be alive today without them? (Unimplemented trade bans definitely do not work!)