Use and consumption of rhino horn

Rhino horn trafficking as a form of transnational organised crime 2012-2021

2022 GLOBAL THREAT ASSESSMENT
The Wildlife Justice Commission acknowledges the immense challenges facing law enforcement agencies that are investigating the transnational organised criminal networks trafficking in rhino horn. These challenges include legislative deficiencies, insufficient resources, mandate, technical capacity, intelligence sharing issues, and of course, the scourge of corruption. We also pay our respects to those officers and rangers who have paid the ultimate price and those who continue to risk their lives on the frontline preventing the poaching of rhinos and investigating these criminal networks.

The Wildlife Justice Commission is committed to continuing to support law enforcement agencies as they work to end the trafficking of rhino horn.

It is with this mission that we produce this threat assessment. It aims to share strategic intelligence that identifies and provides insights on present and emerging organised crime threats relating to rhino horn trafficking. It interprets and analyses intelligence holdings and information from open sources to build the global intelligence picture, propose hypotheses about the immediate or imminent threats, identify where intelligence gaps exist, and highlight vulnerabilities that could become potential threats in the future.

We hope that this assessment will go some way towards assisting law enforcement agencies working across the illegal rhino horn supply chain to maximise their response and impact in addressing this issue, and to continue to build on the important progress and achievements that are being made.

The full report is set out in 10 chapters covering key criminal elements of the illegal rhino horn trade.

Recognising the density of detail in the report, each chapter is written to be able to be read as a standalone topic with the aim of making the report more accessible and useful for policy makers, practitioners and researchers interested in a specific aspect of criminality. The stand alone publication focuses on the use and consumption of rhino horn.
Acknowledgements

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## Acronyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AIS</td>
<td>Automatic Identification System</td>
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<tr>
<td>ANAC</td>
<td>National Administration of Conservation Areas</td>
</tr>
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<td>ASB</td>
<td>Anti-Smuggling Bureau</td>
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<tr>
<td>CITES</td>
<td>Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora</td>
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<tr>
<td>DFFE</td>
<td>Department of Forestry, Fisheries, and the Environment</td>
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<tr>
<td>DRC</td>
<td>Democratic Republic of Congo</td>
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<tr>
<td>EEFC</td>
<td>Environmental Enforcement Fusion Centre</td>
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<tr>
<td>FRELIMO</td>
<td>Liberation Front of Mozambique</td>
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<tr>
<td>HAWKS</td>
<td>Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation</td>
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<tr>
<td>KLIA</td>
<td>Kuala Lumpur International Airport</td>
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<tr>
<td>OBK</td>
<td>Operasi Bersepadu Khazanah</td>
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<tr>
<td>PDR</td>
<td>(Lao) People’s Democratic Republic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERHILITAN</td>
<td>Department of Wildlife and National Parks</td>
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<tr>
<td>RMB</td>
<td>Chinese Renminbi</td>
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<tr>
<td>SANParks</td>
<td>South African National Parks</td>
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<tr>
<td>SAPS</td>
<td>South African Police Service</td>
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<tr>
<td>SAR</td>
<td>(Hong Kong) Special Administrative Region</td>
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<td>SERNIC</td>
<td>National Criminal Investigation Service</td>
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<tr>
<td>TCM</td>
<td>Traditional Chinese medicine</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNODC</td>
<td>United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USD</td>
<td>United States Dollar</td>
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<tr>
<td>VND</td>
<td>Vietnam Dong</td>
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Introduction

Rhino horn trafficking remains a severe problem that needs to be addressed with a new sense of urgency as transnational organised crime. Over the past 10 years, the illegal killing of rhinos and trafficking of their horns has grown as a global criminal enterprise, comprising multiple criminal components dominated by greed and the pursuit of substantial profits.

This threat assessment presents a comprehensive analysis of rhino horn trafficking during the decade from 1 January 2012 to 31 December 2021.

It was compiled following analysis of 674 rhino horn seizure incidents collected from open-source reports that occurred globally during this decade, in addition to seven years of criminal intelligence and findings from Wildlife Justice Commission investigations into rhino horn trafficking conducted since 2015, and other open-source research.

This assessment aims to examine the driving forces behind the trade and changes in the criminal landscape. It also considers the threat to rhinos in 2022, with recommendations to help inform interventions to address this issue and ensure the global response is commensurate and appropriately targeted to current and future needs.
Use and consumption of rhino horn

The rhino horn trade in Asian consumer countries appears to centre on two diverse markets: one which uses horn as a luxury product and symbol of status, and the other for its purported medicinal properties. The market is dynamic, with some consumers reporting to purchase horn for both reasons and others shifting their motivations for buying horn from status to medical purposes. Yet, the size and scope of each market does not appear to be fully understood, the consequences of which may have significant implications from a policy and crime prevention perspective.

1. Sanitised intelligence and findings from seven years’ worth of Wildlife Justice Commission investigations are interwoven throughout this threat assessment to provide context and insights into changes in the criminal dynamics of rhino horn trafficking. Where information is drawn from any other source, it is referenced with footnotes and acknowledged as such. Any non-referenced information, inferences or interpretation should be understood as being sourced from Wildlife Justice Commission intelligence analysis.


KEY FINDINGS

✓ Investigations indicate there is a strong demand for rhino horn in China, especially for its potential as an investment item. This demand accounts for a substantial proportion of horn that is entering Vietnam before being smuggled overland to clients in China. More research is needed to inform behaviour change efforts to reduce the demand for rhino horns.

✓ Criminal investigations in Vietnam find that the rhino horn market is driven by Vietnamese nationals supplying Chinese buyers, particularly for worked products such as jewellery. Although Vietnam is known to be a primary destination for rhino horn, it is also clearly a highly significant transit area for products ultimately bound for China.

✓ Investigations found that only a small amount of rhino horn is in demand for medicinal purposes, usually the offcuts and leftover pieces following the carving process. These findings contradict the current narrative that the market for rhino horn is driven by Vietnamese demand for use in health tonics and as hangover cures.

✓ Over the past two years, several references have been made to the use of rhino horn to aid swift recovery following contracting the COVID-19 virus. However, given the status of the pandemic, the risk that this will materialise into a new trend or demand is assessed to be low. What this does reflect though is the versatility of criminals to manipulate and exploit opportunities such as COVID-19 for their own financial gain.
Rhino horn is commonly cited to be sought-after as an ingredient in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) for its fever-reducing and cleansing qualities, and newer forms of demand in Vietnam where it has been believed to contain cancer-curating properties\(^4\) and as a hangover tonic.\(^5\) However, other studies have found that a distinct and much larger portion of rhino horn demand relates to decorative artefacts for its investment and collectable value.\(^6\) Although little research exists on this type of demand, investigations by the Wildlife Justice Commission point to substantial demand for horn to be processed into jewellery, while the stockpiling of rhino horn is likely to be occurring for investment purposes specifically within China.

It is paramount that the range of factors driving crime are constantly evaluated and analysed to ensure the intelligence picture is up-to-date and informs the decision-making process at a policy and policing level, to identify the most effective way to intervene.

To exemplify, over the past few years demand reduction campaigns have tended to focus on the use of rhino horn for medicinal purposes within Vietnam,\(^7\) which may not have considered the popular use of rhino horn in worked form as items of jewellery and libation cups in China. The nature of the relationship this product has as an investment piece may also have been underestimated and overlooked from a behavioural change perspective.

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**Historic use of rhino horn for carving purposes**

“What a shame that I don’t have a pair of wings like a phoenix so I can fly to my beloved one, but at least our shared hearts are deeply connected like those mysterious rhino horns.”

— LI SHANGYIN (813-858)
As early as the T’ang dynasty (618-907 AD), the medicinal use of rhinoceros horn has been recorded in China. It was believed that when a poisonous liquid was poured into a rhino horn cup, the cup would change colour or white foam would appear to alert the presence of poison.8

The Ming dynasty (1368-1644 AD) was the most popular period in terms of demand for rhino horn carvings. Intercontinental trade routes with Africa had been established, giving access to black and white rhino horns.9

By the time of the Qin (221-207 BC) and Han (206 BC-220 AD) dynasties, rhinos had already become rare, and by the Qing dynasty (1644-1912), the entire rhino population in China had been poached to extinction.

Trade in rhino horn (including carvings) has been illegal in China since 1993, although antique rhino horn carvings (pre-CITES specimens prior to 1947) are permitted to be sold and auctioned for artistic purposes.10 The trade and transportation of antiques is controlled through domestic regulations.11 A prominent example of this trade is the Bonhams auction in Hong Kong SAR in 2018, where libation cups, snuff bottles, pouring vessels, a hairpin and a knife made of rhino horn were auctioned.

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The current black market in rhino horn carvings

The historic expert carving of rhino horn is believed to no longer exist, but new carving practices have emerged in recent years. Several contemporary uses of carved rhino horn include the demand for carved artefacts (both antiques and new) as an investment or collector’s item, for laundering poached horns and as fake antique rhino horn artefacts.

Furthermore, Wildlife Justice Commission’s investigations continue to find that the majority of horns in circulation are being used to carve luxury products, such as bangles and beads. Whole horns are in demand in China, and intelligence reports in May 2021 indicate that a new demand exists for whole horns (not pieces) among wealthy people in Cambodia, although more information is needed to ascertain the significance of this threat. It appears that only a small amount of rhino horn is in demand for medicinal purposes, usually the offcuts and leftover pieces following the carving process which are ground to make rhino horn powder. As one Vietnamese trader explained in 2022, the Chinese rhino horn market is far larger than the Vietnamese market, with Chinese buyers preferring to use rhino horn for display items such as jewellery and tea sets, and if it is used in traditional medicine, it is in a “small dose mixed with other ingredients”. He claimed that Vietnamese consumers tend to use rhino horn to “show off and don’t understand its usages well”. These findings contradict the current narrative that the market for rhino horn is driven by Vietnamese demand for use in health tonics and as hangover cures.

Between 2015 and 2016, the Wildlife Justice Commission conducted an extensive, 18-month long investigation in Vietnam (Operation Phoenix), which found the major use of rhino horn was for carved products such as art, jewellery, and décor. During the entire investigation, an estimated 1,061 kg of rhino horns in both raw and processed form were observed in trade. A substantial proportion of this was offered for sale as worked horn items, with the market appearing to be driven by Vietnamese nationals supplying Chinese clientele with rhino horn products.

To illustrate the size of this trade, an extrapolation from the quantity of horn parts and products observed during the investigation suggested the volume of these commodities represented a minimum of 401 and a maximum of 579 rhinos (Table 1), and therefore potentially up to 43% of all

15. These characteristics are further described in section 3.3 of this report.
African rhinos poached in 2015. As such, this one market and the way it operated can be understood to be representative of a large portion of the global illegal rhino horn trade.

Table 1: The range of rhino horn products offered for sale during Operation Phoenix.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commodity Type</th>
<th>Number of rhinos</th>
<th>Estimated Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Min.</td>
<td>Max.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>356 horns/tips</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>356</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processed products</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>401</td>
<td>579</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of traders were found to be dealing in rhino horn jewellery (beads, pendants, bracelets, bangles), libation bowls, tea sets, and offcuts or blocks/shapes ready for carving. Table 2 provides an overview of the type and number of products directly observed for sale and highlights the prevalence of artefacts and jewellery products in trade. Beads made from rhino horn were the most frequently occurring item offered for sale.

In contrast, and unexpectedly, any appetite for rhino horn for medicinal purposes was not observed. To demonstrate, of over 8,000 images of illegal wildlife products offered for sale during the investigation to undercover operatives, less than five featured offcuts of rhino horn. In terms of volume, 125 kg of offcuts (including blocks/shapes ready for carving) were documented for sale, accounting for 11% of the total rhino horn products observed (Table 2). It was assessed that because the trade in offcuts is opportunistic and does not constitute a significant share of the market in terms of volume or financial value, that it represents a much lower criminal threat than the trade in carved products.


Table 2: The range of rhino horn products offered for sale during Operation Phoenix.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Whole horn/tips</th>
<th>Bangles</th>
<th>Bracelets</th>
<th>Pendants</th>
<th>Beads</th>
<th>Libation bowl/cups</th>
<th>Offcuts (kg)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>356</td>
<td>781</td>
<td>530</td>
<td>1,778</td>
<td>10,123</td>
<td>1,099</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>124.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Consideration may need to be given to the potential over-representation of a Chinese market due to the use of covert Wildlife Justice Commission investigators of Chinese ethnicity, which could have had the effect of minimising the Vietnamese element of the market. Yet, given the volume of products documented during the investigation, estimated to be worth USD 42.7 million based on prices of products offered at that time (Table 1), it is likely to account for a substantial proportion of the rhino horn market, the vast majority of which was aimed at Chinese nationals. Furthermore, Wildlife Justice Commission investigations have consistently found Vietnamese wholesale traders are less willing to deal with covert investigators of Vietnamese ethnicity as they are not viewed as serious buyers of rhino horn.

Although Vietnam is known to be a primary destination for rhino horn, it is also clearly a highly significant transit area for products ultimately bound for China. Research that has relied on a review of trafficking patterns and expatriate involvement in Africa may have overstated the significance of the domestic Vietnamese market.

The rhino horn carving process

The modus operandi of ivory carving in Asian consumer countries is well-documented. Ivory carving was particularly popular in the 1980s. However, between 1991 and 1993 demand fell, and all ivory carving shops were forced to close in China following the domestic ivory trade ban in 2017. However, very little is known about the carving and manufacturing process of rhino horn in China. The automatisation and mass production of ivory carvings is well-researched. For example, in Operation Jeopardy, the Wildlife Justice Commission discovered sophisticated ivory carving machines in a factory in Cambodia. In many studies, ivory and rhino horn carving factories are mentioned together, suggesting both products may be processed in the same factories. Some studies report that mechanical rhino horn processing in factories is preferred by traders to keep prices low.

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and reach a bigger clientele,\(^2\) as was observed during Operation Phoenix.

During Wildlife Justice Commission investigations, many Vietnamese and Chinese traders involved in the supply of illegal wildlife products have provided insights about the way the carving process of rhino horn works between Vietnam and China.

- **It is believed** that some proportion of products are carved in China and then brought into Vietnam to sell. During one conversation with a trader based in Pingxiang, Guangxi province who was involved in the trafficking of ivory and rhino horn carvings, it was reported that he no longer has Vietnamese ivory pendants and will only import the uncarved pendants from Vietnam. He stated that this is because the carving skill in Vietnam is so bad, rendering the products difficult to sell. The carved pendants he sells are all custom made in China, where he stated, “people’s standards are quite high”.

- **Another Vietnamese trader** claimed he worked as a primary-level supplier and made little profit from this level of trade, i.e. his customers would on-sell his products to a third trader, who then sells to the end-consumers, and thereby they can earn much higher profits. He said that products are imported from Vietnam to Dongyang, Zhejiang province for further carving. Goods also go the other way around, which are directly purchased in Zhejiang or Fujian provinces and then sent down to Pingxiang after being carved.

- **One Chinese trader** based in Malaysia offered undercover operatives raw rhino horns for sale, as well as three libation cups/bowls, all of which had been processed and carved in Putian, Fujian province and stocked in China. The trader also complained that the carvers were keeping the offcuts of the rhino horn from the carving, on top of their carving fee.

- **In December 2016,** a Wildlife Justice Commission investigator was offered one whole rhino horn, as well as six rhino horn bangles and eight rhino horn bracelets weighing 603 g in total. The Chinese trader reported to the investigator that he was located in Xianyou, Fujian province, and that all the rhino horn products he has access to were stocked in Fujian.

\(^2\) Ammann (2011); Hübschle (2016); Crosta et al. (2017); Vigne (2020); Vigne & Martin (2018).
Similar dynamics have been observed in relation to the ivory carving process, where raw ivory is smuggled into Southeast Asia from Africa, broken down into smaller consignments and then processed into worked goods at various locations. Better quality carving (for ivory and rhino horn) tends to occur in China where finished items are then moved into retail sites across the region where it is safer to operate, such as Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Vietnam. Given the scale of trade in carved rhino horn products documented during Operation Phoenix, greater effort needs to be placed on fully assessing the size of this market and the risk that it presents.

Some Vietnamese traders have referred to the “Three Regions Brothers Club”, a Vietnamese business network where jewellers, carvers, wildlife traders, and gem traders would meet on a regular basis to exchange business ideas, experiences, and facilitate trade deals among each other. Networking events would be held a few times per year, attended by at least 50 traders. The club has reportedly disbanded.
Intelligence Gap: Manufacturing rhino horn products outside of Asia

A 2017 TRAFFIC report assessing trends in the rhino horn trade between 2010 and 2017 revealed that criminal syndicates of Chinese origin, operating in South Africa, were manufacturing finished rhino horn artefacts such as beads, bracelets, bangles, bowls, cups, rough disks and rhino horn powder in source countries, prior to smuggling them to Southeast Asia. The concerns raised were in reference to the possibility that the detection of such goods is harder, as they do not look like rhino horn. TRAFFIC reported that this trend might amplify the challenge presented to law enforcement along the rhino horn supply chain to intercept rhino horn products. Several small home workshops were discovered during police investigations in South Africa where rhino horn was cut, carved, and packaged for export. Also fakes, primarily made from cow horn, were found to be processed in South Africa.

One such example was a raid on a house near Johannesburg in June 2017, where police discovered a manufacturing workshop. An unspecified quantity of large, polished beads, slices and other carvings were seized, along with processing tools such as a bandsaw and an angle grinder. Two bags containing rhino horn powder and offcuts were also found, along with a cooler box containing frozen lion bones and illegal ammunition. Two Chinese and one Thai national were arrested.

The extent to which this type of activity is occurring is not fully understood. Occasionally, manufactured horn products have appeared in shipments, though they’ve rarely contained beads or bracelets derived from rhino horn. Many of these cases were in 2017 which would suggest they are a low risk compared to other types of smuggling methods being applied to rhino horn, but this should be continually monitored as a potential threat.

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23. Ibid.
Investment and collectable value

Despite international media and conservationists often attributing the poaching of rhinos to demand for rhino horn in TCM and other health or recreational uses in Vietnam, horn appears to be mainly sought-after for its rarity as a collector’s item and prestige of ownership, both in China and Vietnam. In particular, the art and antiques market for rhino horn carvings appears to be an underestimated driver of rhino horn consumption in China. Media content analysis of Chinese newspapers revealed that rhino horn consumption was most frequently reported for investment and collectable value (75%) and artistic value (40%), with a smaller portion for medical value (29%). In Chinese media, rhino horn art is portrayed as an excellent investment opportunity, the value of which is tied more to its rarity than its artistic nature.

The demand for rhino horn for its investment and collectable value is distinctly different from the market in TCM and other health or medicinal uses. In addition to the underground supply chain, a different group of stakeholders is involved to supply this demand, including antique dealers, art collectors, investors, speculators, auction houses, investment companies, and museums. This should be seen as an additional, separate threat to rhino conservation efforts, while the lack of research and information available concerning this situation is a key intelligence gap.

The Wildlife Justice Commission has observed a preference for fresh horn in the trade, often the fresher the better. Rhino horn does degrade over time, unlike other high-value wildlife commodities such as ivory. Degradation would affect the use of raw horn as an investment product and could reduce the long-term value of rhino horn stockpiles. However, once it is carved and polished, rhino horn preserves well and is less susceptible to moulding and deterioration. The Wildlife Justice Commission has also directly observed ‘care takers’ in Vietnam drying newly imported poached horns with a hair dryer to reduce such moulding and loss of material. During investigations, wild rhino horns appear to be more desirable in the trade than farmed horn, due to this perceived freshness. However, this does raise questions about how the freshness of a horn affects its value when used for investment purposes.

Laundering poached horns as antiques

As the trade in antique (pre-CITES) rhino horn artefacts is both legal and lucrative, and because these objects are much sought-after amongst art collectors and connoisseurs in both Asian and
Western markets, a trend was witnessed whereby poached raw rhino horns are processed and sold as fake antiques. Hence, recently poached horns were laundered through antique markets. An example is the case of Zhifei Li, the owner of an antique business in China, who had smuggled carved rhino horn artefacts from the United States via Hong Kong SAR to China. Li admitted to selling 30 raw rhino horns to factories in China, where the horns were processed into fake antiques. This process has been coined ‘zuo jiu’ (meaning ‘to make old’). Further, Li admitted to selling rhino horn and ivory artefacts to buyers in Europe and the United States through auction websites and phone bidding. Upon his arrest, Li claimed his rhino horns were over 50 years old and that no CITES permits were required for pre-Convention horns – both claims were false.

Similar concerns have been raised regarding the antique market in the UK. A study found that 1,247 rhino horn antiques were sold in this manner between 2017 and 2019, which reflected a 101% increase in ‘antique’ horn carvings. Furthermore, many offers for antique carvings were either missing or had inadequate age estimates of the artefacts, making it impossible to prove that the items were pre-Convention. In total, 89% of the purportedly ‘antique’ carvings lacked proof of origin or age. However, detailed information on the weight in grams or kilograms was provided, indicating that the artefacts were not aimed at genuine antique collectors. Several strikingly similar, modern-looking artefacts were offered in 2019, which instigated a police investigation. Many of the rhino horn antiques were sold for suspiciously low prices, which might indicate that laundering horns through the antiques trade has presented a cheap alternative for acquiring rhino horn in consumer countries. Five British auction houses


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31. Ibid.


33. Ibid.
advertised in Mandarin, clearly catering for Chinese buyers. This in itself is not alarming, considering the antiques market in China, but combined with the other factors, it is a concerning sign.34

Traditional medicinal use of rhino horn in China

Bencao Gangmu or Compendium of Materia Medica, written by Li Shizheng in 1578 Ming Dynasty China, alluded to “rhino horn... bitter, sour, salty, cold, not poisonous... mainly used to cure spitting blood... grind rhino horn in water, turn it into thick fluid and swallow, immediate effect. Detoxification, reduce the body heat.”

Prior to China’s ban on domestic trade and medicinal use of rhino horn and the removal of rhino horn from the Chinese Pharmacopoeia in 1993, it was considered to be an effective and important ingredient in traditional Chinese medicines. Even after 1993, rhino horn is still regarded by many in China, as well as other Sinosphere countries, for its medicinal use. TCM practitioners most commonly prescribe rhino horn for dispelling heat, detoxification, cooling the blood and treating wenbing or warm-heat infectious diseases.35 Rhino horn for medicinal purpose is consumed by dissolving powder or thin shavings in tea, hot water, or alcohol.

Today, consumers appear to use rhino horn more liberally and not necessarily with a prescription for what TCM practitioners consider necessary, thereby potentially inflating demand.36 A quantitative online survey by USAID Wildlife Asia in 2018 (coinciding with the lunar new year gifting season) of 1,800 self-reported wildlife consumers in China found indications of some shift towards viewing rhino horn as medicine (for well-being, good health, curing illness, etc.) over the status-related motivations such as affirmation of wealth and success.37

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34. Ibid.
37. CITES CoP18 Doc 83.1.
In 2018, China’s State Council issued an official circular to reopen its domestic trade and permit some medicinal rhino horn use under specific conditions. However, implementation has been postponed following international criticism and the former ban is maintained, though it appears that the intention remains to reopen trade at some point in the future.

Historically there has been a preference for the Asian species of rhino and its purported benefits for traditional medicine. Specifically, in Taiwan, pharmacists surveyed in the 1990s stated that Asian or ‘fiery’ rhino horn was more potent and effective than its African ‘water’ counterpart. Due to the limited number of Asian rhinos across their range in comparison to African rhinos, Asian rhino horns are rarer in trade and subsequently more valuable.

Use of rhino horn as a hangover cure in Vietnam

Rhino horn use in Vietnam has been associated with a means to show power, wealth, and social status, and treating hangovers has been cited as the most popular use of rhino horns among high-income Vietnamese in urban areas. This has been described as showing utilitarian values among users and thus explaining modern motivations to consume rhino horn in Vietnam. A 2015 survey of over 600 wealthy Vietnamese men in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City found that of those who admitted to using rhino horn, 47% reported to use it as a cure for hangovers. A 2012 report by TRAFFIC also described rhino horn consumers in Vietnam who “routinely mix rhino horn powder with water or alcohol as a general health and hangover-curing tonic,” an extravagant version of a detox routine.

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Use of rhino horn as an aphrodisiac in Vietnam

The 2012 TRAFFIC report also described consumers who believed that rhino horn could cure impotence and enhance sexual performance. Vietnam appears to be the only country in the world where rhino horn has gained a reputation as an aphrodisiac. According to another study, a Vietnamese website claimed that “rhino horn is more effective than Viagra, allowing men to have sex for 2 to 4 hours”. Current Vietnamese websites describe that “recently, it was thought that rhino horn has a strong aphrodisiac effect, curing impotence.”

The TRAFFIC report states that Vietnamese buyers who believe in rhino horn’s aphrodisiac powers may have picked up on a media obsession with the idea. Misrepresentations of rhino horn being consumed in Southeast Asian countries as an aphrodisiac are commonly present in Western media, and while there have been instances of rhino horn consumed as an aphrodisiac by the elite in Vietnam, it is generally not consumed for this purpose.

Use of rhino horn ‘glue’ in Vietnam

New research from TRAFFIC in 2022 has found online advertisements for rhino horn ‘glue’ in Vietnam as a new product being marketed to consumers. The ‘glue’ is reported to be made from a combination of rhino horn, rhino skin, pangolin, seahorse, gecko, and other components and sold as a treatment for male sexual enhancement, as a tonic for the liver, kidneys, and eyes, as a detoxicant, to strengthen joints, and potential cancer cure, among other purported uses. At this stage, little is known about what type of consumers are using the ‘glue’ or how widespread it is.

References:
45. Ibid.
The impact of COVID-19

There were fears that wildlife products used in TCM, such as rhino horn, could increase in demand in consumer countries as COVID-19 remedies, causing the media to coin the situation a ‘COVID conservation crisis’. Although many of these impacts rely on speculation rather than evidence, it is suspected that the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on rhino poaching could be detrimental to conservation and counter-poaching efforts.

The traditional use of rhino horn to reduce body heat and treat *wenbing* or warm-heat infectious diseases would include diseases such as COVID-19. This may provide some substance as to why medicines containing rhino horn may be consumed in response to COVID-19.

More specifically, during the Wildlife Justice Commission’s investigations over the past two years several references have been made to the use of rhino horn to aid swift recovery following contracting the COVID-19 virus. However, given the advanced status of the pandemic, the risk that this will now materialise into a new trend or demand is assessed to be low. What this does reflect though is the versatility of criminals to manipulate opportunities such as COVID-19 to exploit for their own financial gain.

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Law enforcement and legal experts fighting transnational organised wildlife crime.