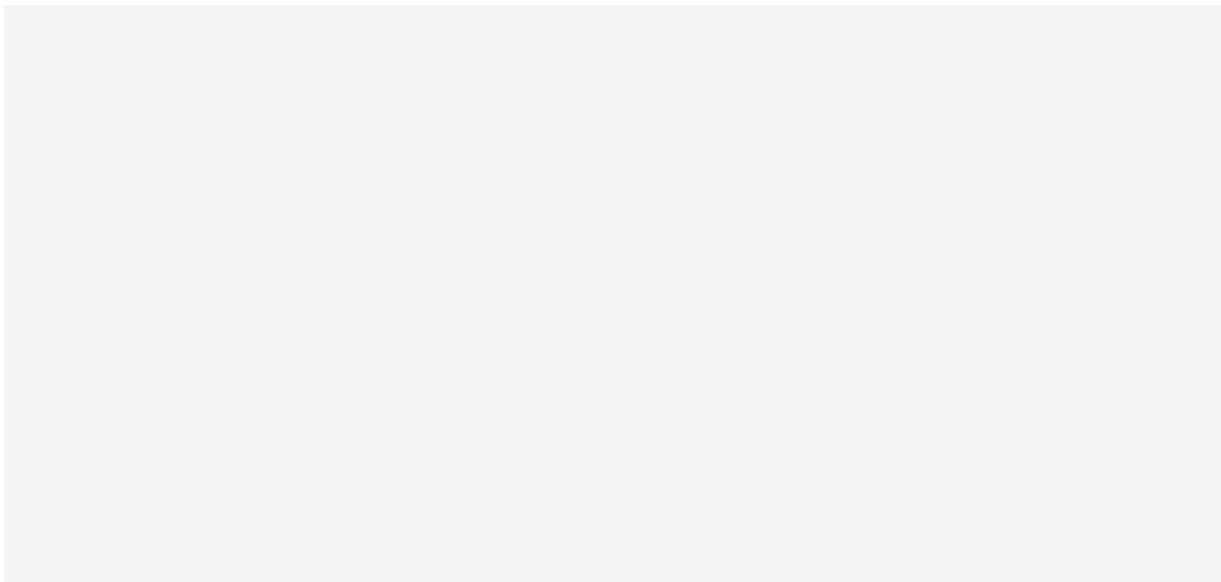


Damned if you do, and

June 29 2012 at 12:36pm
By Damien Mander



Damien Mander instructs rangers at the newly constructed ranger training academy in Victoria Falls. Picture: Davina Jogi

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- [What I learnt on my journey](#)
- [Understanding traditional medicine](#)

The rhino is being hunted to extinction for its horn. As it becomes increasingly rare, the market value increases, further aggravating the situation.

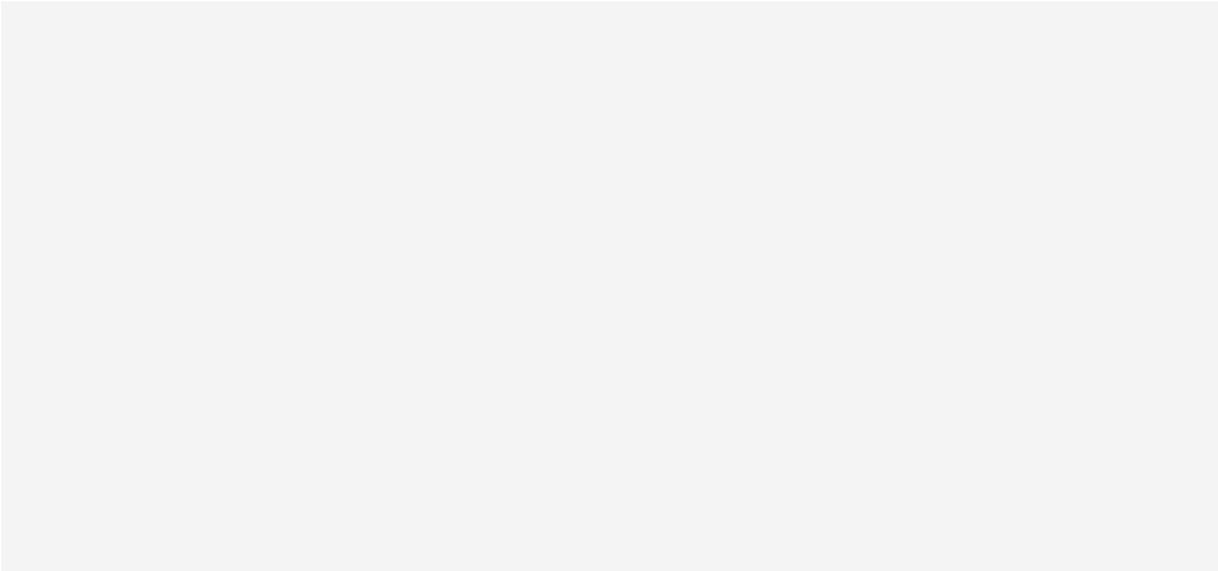
It has now become an ornamental object of status within Vietnamese society. When the market was over-supplied with these products, the value dropped and with it demand. Could this work with the current stockpiles of rhino horn and subsequent harvesting of specified rhino across the world?

The horn is also being used in the Far East for traditional medicine, as it has for thousands of years. Western philosophy calls for education in Asia to shift what has been portrayed as a culture running almost as deep as their DNA make-up itself. Media campaigns are costly and perhaps the money could be better spent on wildlife conservation.

A 35-year-old international Cites trade ban on rhino horn is due for review in 2013. If passed, stockpiles of horn may be eligible for controlled sale to the Far East. Protected areas holding rhino will, without harming the animal, be able to harvest the horn every three years as it continually grows back. If managed correctly, large amounts of funding could be injected into a struggling wildlife conservation industry.

I travelled to Vietnam to explore the option of education against the use of horn and also to understand a culture of traditional medicine use dating back 2 500 years. My insight here is not just about the survival of a species, but the logical use of a sustainable resource.

The trade, the logic



IAPF rangers on the frontline in Zimbabwe.

The illegal trade in wildlife is a multi-billion-dollar industry, one of the largest criminal industries in the world. The flagship species driving public awareness of this major threat to biodiversity at the moment is the rhinoceros.

Across Africa, rhino populations have been decimated for decades. Of note is the decline in black rhino numbers across the continent by more than 96 percent in just 30 years. This is one of the most rapid declines of any large mammal recorded. The stronghold of rhinos has now been reduced primarily to South Africa. A cascading level of destruction now sweeps remaining populations across Southern Africa.

This has sparked a knee-jerk public outcry that has put the situation on to the global stage in a seemingly bigger way than ever before. But is it too late? Has the last rhino to die already been born?

South Africa alone lost 448 rhino during 2011 in targeted attacks for their precious and increasingly valuable horn. This year is shaping up to be much more devastating, with an estimated 600 to be murdered by the end of the year. Half of these deaths will be in the Kruger Park, which hosts the world's largest population of rhino.

Since 1977, Cites, or the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species, has attempted to stop the global trade in rhino horn by maintaining an international trade ban. This ban has pushed the trade underground and on to the black market to feed demand. Many believe this is now aggravating the situation. Despite tougher sentences, the scarcity and growing price of rhino horn is increasing demand. This is making it a more viable option for poachers and middlemen involved with the trade.

The horn, holding seemingly mystical healing powers within various traditional Asian medical practices, now sells for vast amounts to the end buyer on the streets in Vietnam. Vietnam is the current hotspot destination in the Far East for rhino horn trade, fuelled by cultural heritage, economic growth, social status and desperation for disease cure.

I travelled to Vietnam to investigate the history of traditional Vietnamese medicine, the cultural beliefs that can easily be misunderstood by Western society, and the future of rhino horn use in the Far East. One thing is apparent – the fate of the rhino is at stake. The question remains though; is the solution to this raging war right under our nose? Can beliefs dating back millennia simply be changed? This is one of the primary suggestions being put forward at the moment.

What if the demand for rhino horn could be met and a good majority of the revenue put back into conservation? For this to happen, Cites representatives would need to make a landmark decision at the 2013 summit and lift a 35-year ban.

If the decision is not passed at this meeting, then 2016 will be the next opportunity to possibly save the rhino from extinction in the wild.

We argue about the barbaric use of rhino horn by Asians for what we perceive as a myth. But we all need to be reminded of some simple facts. We take milk from cows, wool from sheep, eggs from birds and honey from bees. There are not too many other creatures that we humans need mainstream products from that we don't have to kill for. The rhino, with its precious horn, although not mainstream, could be one of these creatures. A rhino will live to be almost 40 years old. Once mature at four, the horn can be taken off every three years and it will continue to grow back, much like human hair.

I personally don't know if the legalisation in the rhino horn trade is the definite answer to the future of the rhino, and no one can guarantee this. One thing I do know is that the current situation of trying to preserve them, with limited resources, is not sustainable overall. Rhinos are on a one-way path to extinction in the wild, and we need to be discussing our options.

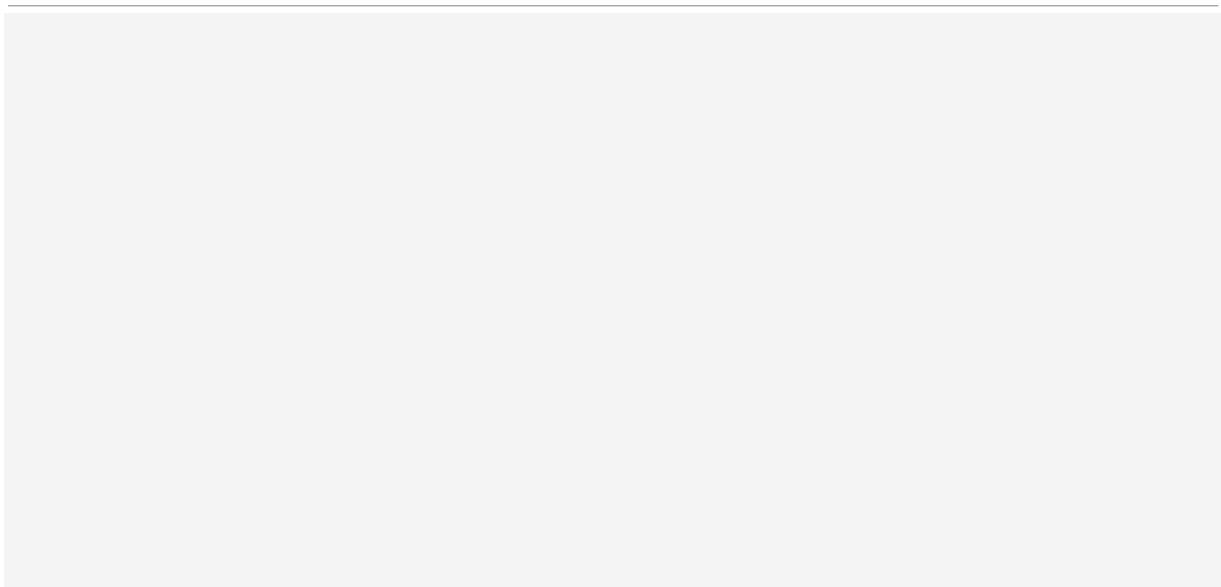
We need co-ordination in the way forward and support for the rangers on the ground while perspectives are argued at policy level.

If we had a magic wand, and could inject 5 percent of South Africa's annual defence budget, or R1.92 billion, then perhaps we would not need to be looking at alternatives. Unfortunately, conservation is an afterthought for many people globally, when weighed against the likes of defence or health care.

The rhino situation is a controversial subject with opinions for and against legalisation. Whatever you perceive my point of view to be, please remember, it is just mine.

Ho Chi Minh City – animal parts in medicine the norm

June 29 2012 at 12:24pm
By Damien Mander



Various animal parts on display in the Chinese medicine quarter of Ho Chi Minh City.

After arriving in Ho Chi Minh City, I begin my journey north. It takes me through Saigon, as the city is still known by the locals, into the Mekong Delta, the jungles on the border of Cambodia and up through the country to the capital, Hanoi. I explore the local perspectives of similar practices that occur across most of the Far East, Latin America, India, Africa and many other parts of the world; the use of animal parts within traditional medicine practices.

It may seem right to certain cultures and wrong to others. What we can't hide, though, is that it happens, and in the case of rhino horn, on an alarming and violent scale. It spans many levels of society, from crime bosses and law-enforcement officers to villagers, conservationists, veterinarians, diplomats and people dying of disease in Asian countries where rhinos are now extinct because of mismanagement.

Although Vietnam is modernising quickly, traditional medicine has not disappeared and if anything, is gaining something of a revitalisation. Traditional Vietnamese and Chinese medicine evolved together and arguably the development of the two is so interwoven that they are often difficult to separate.

At the Museum of Traditional Vietnamese Medicine (TVM) in Ho Chi Minh City I play the dumb tourist, not the CEO of an organisation trying to help save the rhino from extinction. I learn of a long and time-honoured history here. As far back as the 2nd century BC, hundreds of medical herbs were discovered; among them also were precious compounds such as pearl, tortoise-shell, aloe wood, rhinoceros horn and cinnamon. Through trial and error, many kinds of food, vegetable, fruit, herbs and natural compounds were discovered to be drugs or medicines. Whereas this traditional medicine was once only used for the poor, it is now more likely to be used by the middle and upper classes that find their way to a traditional physician either because Western medicine is not working for them, or because they are sceptical about Western medicine. Today, one-third of Vietnamese rely exclusively on traditional medicine and more than 90 percent use it on a regular basis.

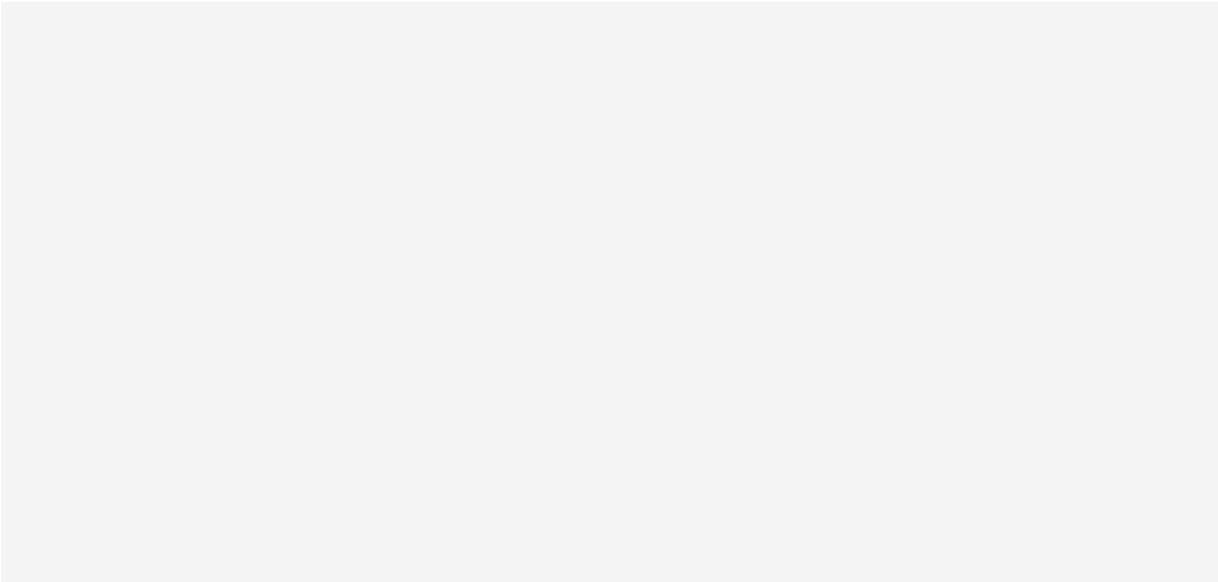
As I walk through the streets where traditional treatments are sold, I converse through my translator with the traders and customers. The treatments are non-threatening, and seem to have therapeutic benefits in calming patients and restoring their confidence. This is because the methods and medicines are so deeply rooted in Vietnamese culture. There is now an increasing interest in using traditional medicine to supplement treatment of chronic illnesses, such as Aids and cancer. I frequently witness a combination of Western and traditional medicine practices. It is not uncommon for a patient to be admitted to hospital and treated by a doctor trained in both disciplines.

In Saigon, I met Stan Gunn, CEO of Vietnam's largest media company. We spoke at length about the use of traditional medicine and the millennia-old culture. He said a well-structured countrywide campaign against the use of rhino horn would cost in the vicinity of US\$40-50 million annually. He asked me: "Do you think spending the same amount in the UK could convince Manchester United supporters to become Manchester City supporters?" The answer was obvious. He went on to highlight, "This is not just thousands of years of culture, this is thousands of years of ingrained DNA we are talking about and no amount of Western-based media campaigns would alter this. Asians just have different cultures and norms to Westerners and find our concerns about the preservation of wild animals curious and funny. To most Asians, wild animals simply represent food, medicine or money."

These comments were the honest response from a company that stood to make significant personal gains from any possible future media campaigns. He said we were wasting our money with media campaigns in Asia, and money would be better spent protecting the animals directly.

The Mekong Delta: learning the rhino doesn't have to be killed

June 29 2012 at 12:13pm
By Damien Mander



Deep in the Mekong delta Damien meets with Mr Nguyen Van Be or 'Mr Be'.

In the Mekong Delta I manage to get an appointment with one of the country's most renowned physicians. Nguyen Van Be, usually referred to as "Ong Ba Dat Phen", translates as the "Man in the second position of the family in the acid land".

After studying and eventually lecturing in Western medicine, Be moved to Dong Thap Muoi and set up the 1 000-hectare sustainable nature reserve from where he practises traditional medicine and runs a pharmaceutical company.

For the past 28 years he has transformed the area into a series of jungle canals, nurseries and balanced ecosystems between plants, animals and communities. The many laboratories onsite attract international guests studying traditional Vietnamese and Western medicine. Be claims to be able to accurately use all of the native plants in Vietnamese medicine and is leading efforts to rewrite ancient scriptures. He sleeps only four hours a day and has not personally utilised any form of Western medicine for almost three decades.

He drove us around the reserve explaining the many intricate ecological balances that revolve around each other. He spoke of previous issues similar to Africa's: poaching, invasive species, fire and community resentment against a protected area – all issues he had eventually overcome.

I became increasingly uneasy as I struggled to think of how I would approach the issue of rhino horn with him. That the rhino horn trade is illegal is commonly known in Vietnam, yet it doesn't restrict its use and if anything makes it a seemingly more desirable commodity.

Back at the main reception area, I took out my laptop and started the 2010 60 Minutes documentary of our team darting and de-horning rhino in Africa. We reached the point where the chainsaw was tearing through the horn of the great black rhino bull Shungu, and eventually it dropped to the ground. I stood holding the horn in my hand, something so desired in the Far East, something so valuable. We watched the animal receive the antidote, rise, and run off in a

cloud of dust. The impact was profound. I had his attention. It was time to talk. We started a conversation that went on for five hours and would leave my interpreter exhausted, asleep at the table.

I explained this Great War raging in Africa. Of conservationists trying to save the rhino from extinction, and poachers from many levels of society risking their lives to get their hands on this prize for sale in the Far East. I told him we were losing this war. I was not in Vietnam to point fingers, rather to understand the history and culture of TVM and the use of rhino horn. Was there a future for it and could education efforts from the West persuade against its use? He came to understand the desperation we were facing and the angle of my approach in Vietnam. Can the market demand be changed? If it can – how? If it can't – then what?

Although his research and business now focus on the use of plant products, he has an intimate knowledge of rhino horn, its history within Eastern medicine and its healing properties. He spoke of a more than 1 000-year-old history in Vietnam and of its appearance in the ancient scriptures of traditional Chinese medicine.

We spoke of the concept of curing cancer of which he strongly advised that there was no proof, and that it was a myth. It is this myth, he states, that has pushed the value of rhino horn to US\$36 000 a kilo among the traditional medicine community in Vietnam and put it out of reach of most practitioners, including himself. When the horn is used in medicinal practices, only tiny amounts of around one gram are used at a time. This would give a 7kg horn 7 000 applications. Or, as it is generally sold in 100g amounts, 100 applications to 70 patients.

I asked Be what he thought were some of the solutions we could offer people in Africa to help them understand that within TVM, rhino horn seemingly works and perhaps we should consider legalising the trade to supply the demand.

“It is a complicated problem at the moment. There needs to be research done on the effects of the horn when used in traditional medicine. There must be co-operation between Asia and Africa in this research,” he said.

He thinks we should be farming the rhino to meet the demand of the Asian market.

Be struggles to understand why this product can be taken without killing the animal, yet animals are being killed for it.

Be went on to say: “Currently it's only available to the very rich and is sometimes displayed in their homes as a status symbol. The horn is only used as a last resort in traditional medicine. In general it's not used as a daily treatment.”

He concluded: “If the rhinos are farmed then there need to be specific regulations and rules regarding the treatment of the animals. They should not be harmed in the process of farming or harvesting.”

To me, protection makes sense when one would want to harvest such a valuable commodity every three years. I left on good terms with Be.

Hanoi – where having horn is status related

June 29 2012 at 12:10pm
By Damien Mander

Snake wine, shark fins and bear bile are readily available at shops in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

On arrival in Hanoi, the nation's capital, I need to seek out case studies that draw comparisons with the current spike in rhino horn use, and also test the theory that horn is readily available within local markets.

Nguyen Van Quan and Douglas Hendrie are Wildlife Crime Unit and Investigations advisers at Education for Nature in Vietnam (ENV). Doug has lived here for 14 years. Both are very familiar with the trade and the culture of traditional medicine. They talk of the spike in rhino horn use in Vietnam as a possible fad.

In the past, lucrative trades have existed in other commodities that were rare and exclusive. Bear bile, soft-shell tortoise and deer antler wine were all previous examples of local wildlife commodities that have been through the spike in Vietnam that rhino horn use is currently going through. The use of these products was medicinal and culinary, but as we discovered, mostly status related.

Whether something may work for cancer or fever is often irrelevant. Having rhino horn in one's possession, and even on display in one's home, distinguishes the owner in social circles.

With these commodities though, previously as exclusive as rhino horn, once the market had been flooded, the price dropped and with it demand.

With substantial rhino horn stockpiles across the African continent, including five tons in Zimbabwe, one now wonders what would happen if they were released on to the market. If done in a controlled fashion and to multiple buyers to minimise further stockpiling, could the exclusivity drop, leading to market price reductions and in turn lessen consumer demand? Would this sale have the same affect on China's market?

The economics of rhino farming could possibly be similar to those of bear bile farming in that the animal needs to be kept alive, not killed. The opening of new farms was banned in Vietnam in 2005 and the trade has become much more regulated compared to what it was. Illegal activities still occur always without enough attention from the authorities. Although these farms are extremely distressing, they are reported to be much more regulated, with the micro-chipping of animals mandatory and phase-out plans being designed. The number of bears in captivity in Vietnam has slowly declined from 4 500 to 3 500 as the price of bile drops and the costs of maintaining the farms increase.

One of Doug's primary concerns within Vietnam, if trade were to be legalised, would be how to regulate it. As with many developing countries, corruption is widely present in Vietnam and the concern of regulating wildlife trade is not at the forefront of everyone's mind. So what could this mean? Continued illegal killing of rhinos in Africa? The sale of imitation horn, as is already happening on the streets in Asia, or perhaps the widespread breeding of rhinos across the country? Already in Vietnam there are three rhino farms with 14 white rhino.

Demand is not determined by supply, but by what the consumer wants, which also determines price. Trade restrictions are likely leading to stockpiling of horns within the black market, as uncertainty grows regarding the future of the rhino and the value of its horn.

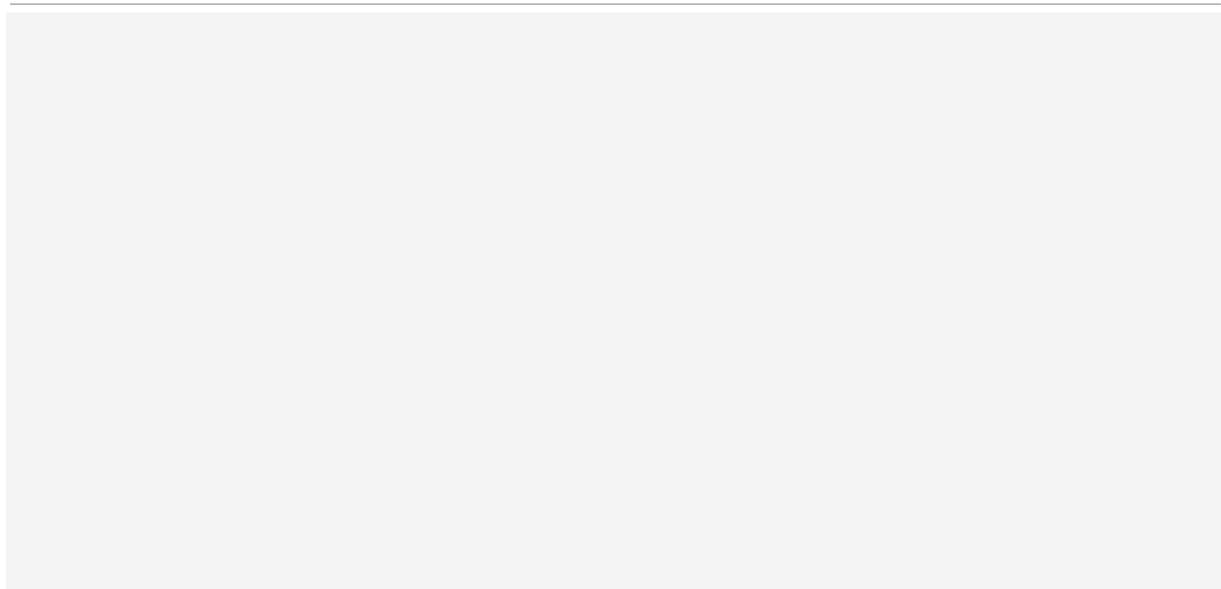
After walking through downtown Hanoi I approach Lan Ong Street, where all the traditional medicine markets are found. I travel through the markets and feel the eyes on me. Western reporters have been flocking here to point fingers, seek interviews and take photographs in recent months of the markets and the end sale point for rhino horn. I know this and bring out an iPhone and show the video of us dehorning rhino in Africa. At first I'm turned away with a polite shake of the head and a finger towards the door. At only the second shop I purchase two dishes used in Vietnam to grind the horn into a powder before it is diluted with water or alcohol to be consumed. The video works again. We ask if they have rhino horn for sale and she says she has. She is willing to sell me rhino horn there and then for US\$75 000 per kilo.

When Vietnamese are struggling with serious health issues and their current treatment regime is not working, their deep-rooted culture incites them to try anything and everything that may assist.

I can't help but wonder whether, if my young son or daughter was dying, I myself wouldn't travel to the ends of the earth and beyond to try to save them, or at least give hope. When life is on the line, where do we stop?

What I learnt on my journey

June 29 2012 at 12:04pm
By Damien Mander



A file photo of a woman grinding rhinoceros horn with water at her apartment. Picture: AP Photo/Na Son Nguyen

China is an international superpower and unlikely to bow to the international demand to cease using traditional medicine containing endangered animals.

At a 2011 CITES meeting, China refused to discuss the issue of how to reduce demand for rhino horn.

Delegates from Vietnam and China agree that farming animals endangered in the wild for their body parts, is a far more logical approach than the continued trend of killing them outright. But the average person on the street often struggles with this concept.

Could the average person stand seeing a rhino in a small enclosure being kept alive for the harvest of its horn? Is this a better option than the extinction of a species because we couldn't stand to see it caged?

The truth is that most humans will place self-preservation and life enjoyment over the death or discomfort of an animal. We struggle with the ethics of regulating human population with 7 billion people on the planet, but we're clever enough to de-sex cats and dogs.

At the end of the day, whilst I struggle seeing animals in cages, I would struggle more knowing that they were extinct from the wild.

If some rhinos must spend their lives in relative confinement so others can be free to survive in the wild, then the logic in me says this is better than total extinction.

China makes up 20 percent of the world's population. Vietnam has almost 90 million citizens. Is the small army of conservationists fighting for the survival of this species able to stand forever against this overwhelming and growing mass of rhino horn users?

If some Asians can express little compassion for captive animals in their own countries, then why should they care about a rhino's welfare on the other side of the planet? At the end of my travels I realise that it is not the Asians directly killing the rhino.

The rhino is being killed by people that sit behind desks on the other side of the world and decide that wildlife managers in Africa cannot utilise their own natural resources sustainably.

Whilst the price of rhino horn goes up, the resources to defend these animals becomes increasingly limited. Without sufficient protection, a landowner holding 10 rhino may lose two or three per year.

With the harvesting of just one horn each year at the current market value the landowner can now invest what is needed into anti-poaching efforts and reduce the threat to the population. With the harvesting of 3 horns annually, they can buy more land and breed more rhino, and overall, protect more biodiversity.

Africa's culture of hunting allows foreign tourists to come onto the continent and hunt the rhino to be taken home and mounted on a wall over a fireplace. This is currently acceptable behaviour, mostly sustainable, and laws protect it. Whilst this happens, many jump up and down at the thought of sustainably taking the horn off a living animal to be used in another culture's medicine.

Can we really change Eastern beliefs and culture? Are we really on enough of a pedestal to do so, or are we just being arrogant? In the mind of an Asian, it is we Westerners killing the rhino, as we will not create a system to give them the horn without killing the animal, when we actually could.

I think deep down CITES officials understand that at some stage harvesting of horns will have to be legalised to some extent. Whether this begins with a release of horns taken from natural deaths or not, only they know.

Understanding traditional medicine

June 29 2012 at 11:56am
By Damien Mander

To properly understand TVM, we must first understand the philosophy of Eastern medicine or Dong Y, which dates back thousands of years. People belonging to Asian cultures are accustomed to relying on distinct health practices and beliefs that are significantly different from those of Western beliefs.

These Western principles are so different that it is often hard for us to comprehend.

We Westerners approach disease by assuming it is from an external force such as bacteria or virus or a slow breakdown of a functional ability of the body.

The cornerstone of Dong Y theory is based on the observed effects of Qi (energy) and the balance of Ying and Yang.

Asian patients have a mind-set where healthiness is a state of balance of Qi, or life-force, between physical, social and the supernatural. They perceive the body to be whole and each part intimately connected.

The system of TVM across most of Vietnam is built on the foundation that all living organisms are made up of the five main elements; wood, metal, fire, earth and water. These have the characteristics of hot, cold, wet and dry.

An imbalance in Qi can lead to an illness as it fails to travel through the complex channels of the body. Qi encompasses more than just energy. It is also blood and fuel gathered and stored by the body. The concept of Qi is universal – our energy and that of the universe is transferable.

Poor diet, hard work or a bad lifestyle can deplete Qi, just as maintaining a healthy lifestyle and practising breathing can restore or harvest energy from the universe.

The task of a traditional medicine practitioner is to identify and correct disharmonies based on the three divisions of Ying and Yang – cold versus hot, interior versus exterior and deficiency versus excess. Prescriptions of plant extracts and other elements can then be prescribed to correct an imbalance.

My Journey to Vietnam - by Damien Mander (June 2012) - Founder & CEO
International Anti-Poaching Foundation -- www.iapf.org & damien@iapf.org

Refer video @ <http://iapf.wordpress.com/?p=331&preview=true>

Please forward to interested wildlife conservationists !!

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