

The push for legalisation of rhino horn trade

By [Sharon van Wyk](#)

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PRETORIA: South Africa is pushing hard for the legalisation of trade in rhino horn. And understandably so. With more than 20 tonnes of stockpiled horn, the country stands to make a fortune if the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) ban is lifted.



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Like chief pro-trade protagonist John Hume, those backing a legalised trade also stand to make huge profits. Hume breeds rhinos for pleasure he says, because he loves the creatures and wants to save them. He believes that farming rhinos and harvesting their horns to meet the rising demand in the Far East, which has fuelled the current rhino poaching crisis, is the only answer to preventing extinction of Africa's rhino.

Hume is backed by some serious pro-trade muscle headed by economist Dawie Roodt. Roodt has made his name in government finance and monetary policy and is a well-known media commentator on matters financial. He has also carved himself a very prominent chair at the head of the pro-trade table.

Roodt doesn't like laws, especially ones which stop people like Hume from doing exactly what they like with their private property. "Laws are silly things invented by politicians," Roodt said in a recent public debate on the legalisation of rhino horn trade at the University of Pretoria.

At the same debate, held by the Zoological Society of Southern Africa, Roodt stated in a manner reminiscent of the character Gordon Gecko in the movie Wall Street that greed, under the banner of entrepreneurship, is good and should be encouraged and stimulated at all cost in order to make South Africa's economy strong.

Steadily applied pressure on CITES

Roodt reckons that legalising trade in rhino horn is a sure-fired winner when it comes to making money, with the possibility that it would save a species almost an afterthought.

Indeed, the apparent security of the rhino species is a happy coincidence to the pro-trade lobby, and a convenient one at that given the vehemence with which they are backing South Africa's steadily applied pressure on CITES to lift the ban on trade.

Throwing in their lot with a government which is publicly failing in its mandate to protect the rhino in its care is a carefully orchestrated tactical manoeuvre aimed at enriching those who stand to make billions from the potential harvesting of rhino horn should they be allowed to openly trade in the commodity. Indeed, it has to be questioned whether the government is not complicit in the demise of the rhino it is supposed to protect in order to better position itself for an assault on CITES and the undoubted rewards a sale of its stockpile would garner. Twenty tonnes of horn at upwards of US\$60,000 per kilo at current black market values is a pretty tidy sum of money - more than enough to build Nkandla six times over.

With almost 1000 rhinos capable of yielding an average of 55kg of horn each throughout their lives, Hume is also sitting pretty in the pound seats. Make no bones about it, the rhino business is big business. Which is why the pro-trade lobby is so vociferous. And why it has the undoubted backing of both government and, it would appear, South Africa's media.

While anti-trade activists and organisations struggle to get their voices heard, pro-traders regularly make the headlines, with reportage largely focussed on how we could trade legally rather than asking whether we should and what the likely repercussions would be. Conspiracy theorists do not need to connect too many dots to find a disturbing pattern emerging.

Elephant poaching crisis

December 2013 saw some major meetings of minds on this and another major conservation issue - the elephant poaching crisis in sub-Saharan Africa, so it comes as no surprise that those in favour of a legalised trade in rhino horn are currently so active and so loud.

A sparkling list of glittering professional pro-trade speakers took the stage at the Portfolio Committee on Water and Environmental Affairs Rhino Workshop - a crucial rhino meeting held in Skukuza in the Kruger National Park at the beginning of December, headed by minister of the environment Edna Molewa and included controversial "rhino economists" Michael t'Sas-Rolfes and Keith Lockwood.

The Skukuza meeting was itself a precursor to a meeting of regional government heads on the same issue, followed immediately by a gathering of African Heads of State at the Elephant Summit in Gaborone, Botswana where the future of Africa's elephants was on the agenda.

Make no mistake that success with CITES on the rhino horn front would quickly be followed by pressure to allow sale of ivory stockpiles with countries like Zimbabwe and Zambia currently leading the vanguard in this respect, under close watch from the most nefarious of allies - China. That China is both the major demand market for both rhino horn and ivory and heavily involved politically and economically in the range states for both animals is no coincidence. That this relationship is overlooked by all but the most hardened anti-trade lobbyists is similarly convenient and glaringly suspicious.

A very clever smokescreen

It would appear that the sophistication and speed of the pro-trade movement, backed by government and mainstream media, has largely outplayed, outwitted and outlasted the anti-trade brigade. In spite of achieving wins in the international arena, thanks largely to high-profile conservation organisations and celebrity endorsement, the anti-trade lobbyists have been stymied in every country that counts when it comes to crunch-time at CITES. This is because the pro-traders have cleverly focussed on rhinos while those against them have been looking at the bigger picture in the form of ivory poaching.

Could it be that the rhino crisis has formed a very clever smokescreen to what is really happening in the rest of Africa and has diverted attention away from a scourge ten times more deadly and threatening, not just to elephants but to all of Africa's wild fauna? If so, the next big question has to be "why?"

The answer most easily arrived at is that by fanning the flames of the rhino inferno, the South African government, in collusion with its pet pro-traders, has created a screen of smoke and mirrors par excellence which has largely bamboozled an audience of bemused, albeit concerned citizens into thinking that the only way to save rhino is by reducing them to mere commodities.

While attention is thus diverted the real intention behind this sleight of hand may be to quietly and inconspicuously open a door which would give both the South African and other African governments "get rich quick" passes through the sale of stockpiled ivory, resulting in the semi-legal mass decimation of what is left of Africa's wild elephant population.

Could it be for this reason that the effective silencing of the anti-trade lobby has taken place, reducing it to a lone voice in a wilderness of greed? Or is that quagmire of self-enrichment really just Africa's much-vaunted entrepreneurial spirit expressing itself, as Roodt would have us believe? Whichever it is, the end for elephant and rhino in their natural state is almost certainly nigh.

ABOUT SHARON VAN WYK

Sharon is an award-winning writer and natural history filmmaker specialising in conservation in sub-Saharan Africa and the role eco-tourism plays in protecting the continent's remaining wilderness areas and the fauna and flora which inhabit them. She has been a journalist for more than 30 years, starting her career in the UK before returning to South Africa, where she lived as a child, 23 years ago.

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