

1,175 rhinos killed by poachers in S.Africa last year: official

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Demand for rhinoceros horn—made of keratin, which is also found in hair and nails—has boomed in Vietnam and China, where it is valued for its supposed medicinal properties

Nearly 1,200 rhinos were killed by poachers in South Africa last year, officials said Thursday, a slight decrease on 2014, but another year of carnage fuelled by Asian-led demand for their horn.

"By the end of December 2015, the number of poached rhinos was 1,175," Environmental Affairs Minister Edna Molewa told reporters.

Fewer than 100 rhinos were poached in 2008, since when numbers have rocketed. A record 1,215 were killed last year.

The slaughter has been driven by demand for their [horn](#) in countries such as China and Vietnam, where they are prized for their purported medicinal properties.

The horn is composed mainly of keratin, the same component as in human nails, but it is sold in powdered form as a supposed cure for cancer and other diseases.

The soaring price of rhino horn and the poaching crisis has sparked a debate on whether to legalise sales in an attempt to stifle the lucrative black market trade.

Legally dehorning a rhino would see a farm owner put the animal under anaesthesia, then saw off the horn.

A South African judge in November lifted a domestic ban on trade in rhino horn, alarming conservationists.

The government appealed against the decision, but lost its latest hearing on Wednesday.

The case, bought by two game breeders, came ahead of a meeting in Johannesburg this year of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which could lift the global ban.

Some experts believe the real figures on poaching deaths are far higher

as many carcasses are never recovered.

South Africa is said to be home to around 20,000 [rhinos](#), some 80 percent of the worldwide population.

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