

Rhino horn smugglers shift to jewellery: report

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Seized rhino horns displayed at a press conference in Malaysia last year.

Rhino horn smugglers in South Africa are increasingly supplying the jewellery trade, marking a shift away from sales to traditional medicine makers, according to a new report published Monday.

Conservation group TRAFFIC said Chinese gangs were processing horns into beads, bracelets and bangles to supply Asia's booming luxury goods

market while also helping traffickers evade detection at airports.

Julian Rademeyer, a project director at TRAFFIC, said that the market for horn from the endangered species had been transformed in recent years.

"These products are exported and sold as they are, not necessarily to be ground down" as before, he told AFP.

"The rhino market has evolved over the years. The syndicates no longer want to export whole horn."

Rhino horn is mostly keratin, the same material as human nails, and is believed to cure cancer and other conditions—as well being marketed as an aphrodisiac in Vietnam and China.

"Prior to that, a lot of the demand was for medicinal purposes, and in Vietnam demand for whole horn as a status symbol," said Rademeyer.

The report, titled "Pendants, Power and Pathways", revealed that smugglers are disguising rhino horn products as toys, artefacts and even hidden in bags of cashew nuts to avoid security detection.

They also wrap them in aluminium foil and smear them with toothpaste and shampoo to hide the tell-tale smell of decay.

The report revealed that countries including Ethiopia and Kenya played a "pivotal role as transit countries in Africa as they have direct links to Asian countries".

South Africa's OR Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg was also identified as a "key hub" for shipments destined for Asian countries.

South Africa, which is home to about 80 percent of the world rhino population, has been hit hardest by poachers. More than 7,100 animals have been killed over the past decade.

Rhino horns are highly coveted in Asia, where they have fetched up to \$60,000 (50,000 euros) per kilogram.

Last month, South Africa hosted its first online auction of rhino horn, following the lifting of the ban on domestic trade. The auction attracted fewer bidders than anticipated.

Activists had opposed the controversial sale, fearing it would fuel trafficking and undermine a 40-year global ban on the trade of rhino horn.

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