

Lab-grown horns and tusks could stop poaching—or not

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Scientists are making mimics of rhino horns and elephant tusks, hoping to drive down the prices of these items on the black market and discourage poaching. But many conservation groups argue that it could have the opposite effect, according to an article in *Chemical & Engineering News (C&EN)*, the weekly newsmagazine of the American Chemical Society.

Melissa Pandika, special to C&EN, reports that in 2015, more than a thousand [rhinos](#) were poached in Africa, and every year, about 27,000 African elephants suffer the same fate. Rhino horns are prized for their purported medicinal benefits, and both [rhino horns](#) and [elephant tusks](#) are often turned into jewelry and other decorative objects by artisans. All of this is happening despite a United Nations treaty prohibiting the global commercial trade of rhino horn and ivory.

Now, companies are betting that flooding the market with synthetic, lab-grown mimics will decrease poaching, making it less worthwhile for hunters. Two companies are growing rhino horns from stem cells, and other researchers are investigating ways to build elephant tusks. Many conservationists, however, say that hunters could try to pass off their wares as being biofabricated. But the scientists propose introducing DNA barcodes or microscopic features to distinguish synthetics from the real thing. Animal conservation groups also argue that the new materials could simply expand demand for such items, creating an inexpensive market existing in parallel with poached items. Alternatively, poached products could become even more desirable, showing that the customer

can afford the risk of getting caught. Although the controversy continues, there's one thing both sides can agree on—the killing of these majestic, endangered animals must end.

More information: "Can synthetic horns and tusks offer hope against poachers?," *Chemical & Engineering News* cen.acs.org/articles/96/i4/syn...usks-offer-hope.html

Provided by American Chemical Society

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