

# Rhino horn used to comfort the terminally ill in Vietnam

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The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) estimates that 1,054 rhino were killed by poachers in South Africa in 2016 and the worldwide number of rhinos remaining is estimated to be 30.000. Credit: University of Copenhagen

The horns of endangered wild rhinoceroses are widely used as a folk cure-all in parts of Asia. A new Danish-Vietnamese study from the University of Copenhagen uncovers new reasons that Vietnamese consumers buy illegal rhino horn. This knowledge can now be used in campaigns to save endangered rhinoceroses.

A new study has found a shift in values driving illegal procurement of horn from endangered [rhinos](#). Powdered horn is wrongly believed to have healing properties and can fetch up to 500,000 kroner per kilo (€67,000). The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) estimates that 1,054 rhino were killed by poachers in South Africa in 2016, and the worldwide number of rhinos remaining is estimated to be 30,000.

Until now, the prevailing wisdom has been that consumers seek out [rhinoceros horn](#) for medical and health-related reasons, such as cancer treatments, hangovers and other ailments. The new study reveals more.

"For us, the surprising trend is that horn is increasingly being used as a symbolic gesture to console terminally ill family members. The horns are intended to provide the ill with a final source of pleasure and to demonstrate that their families have done everything possible to help them," explains Associate Professor Martin R. Nielsen of the Department of Food and Resource Economics. Along with colleague Dang Vu Hoai Nam of GIZ, Nielsen conducted in-depth interviews with 30 recent purchasers of rhino horn in Hanoi and Ho Chi Min City, Vietnam.

The information gained by the study can be used by public authorities and organisations working to reduce the illegal trade in [rhinoceros horn](#) by improving their understanding of consumers, and will be an important aspect of future campaigns aimed at reducing demand.

"Understanding the motivation of horn buyers is vital for addressing this problem. Among other things, our results demonstrate that the nature of demand changes over time. As a result, we must continually rethink strategies to curb the trade in rhinoceros horn," says Martin R. Nielsen.

## **Hangovers and a lack of respect for the rule of law**

Besides using horn to console terminally ill family members, the 30 Vietnamese interviewed also used horn for treating hangovers and as a status symbol in business relations. The study also found that buyers are mainly interested in horn sourced from wild rhinos, and are willing to pay a premium for wild rather than farmed animal horn. Consequently, the researchers believe that a legal, controlled trade of farmed rhino would most likely not serve to reduce poaching.

"The study suggests that information about the decline of rhinoceros populations and awareness about hunting being controlled by organised crime does not affect consumer demand. Dealing with the problem requires other strategies," explains Martin R. Nielsen.

The rhino horn trade is among one of the most organised forms of environmental crime, and the number of rhinos killed by poachers has increased markedly since 2008. Because Vietnam is the country with the greatest demand for rhinoceros [horn](#), it also bears the brunt of the blame for poaching. The majority of remaining wild rhinoceros live in South Africa, where the population of white rhinoceros is estimated to be between 19,000 and 21,000.

**More information:** Hoai Nam Dang Vu et al, Understanding utilitarian and hedonic values determining the demand for rhino horn in Vietnam, *Human Dimensions of Wildlife* (2018). [DOI: 10.1080/10871209.2018.1449038](https://doi.org/10.1080/10871209.2018.1449038)

Provided by University of Copenhagen

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