

Tiger cake and rhino horn – a walk on the Asian wild side

THE AUTHOR



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Two years ago I was filming in a new casino town on the Laos/China border. These new enclaves are built on leased territory, like Macau, and all laws go out the window. Gambling, prostitution, drugs and illegal wildlife consumption become the main economic activities and these new towns become hubs for all kinds of wildlife-related activities including the establishment of bear bile farms. While we walked the streets we found two baby clouded leopards hidden in a cardboard box. I took them out and played with them while the camera was running before the owner started protesting and put an end to it.

In the meantime a lorry driver, who had witnessed the commotion, approached our translator. He told

our guide that if we were interested in these cats there were two tiger cubs a few hours away that were for sale. He gave us the address in case we were interested and we went off to find the place towards the centre of Laos. We got there and were told that the cubs had already been sold to a Vietnamese buyer for USD 4000.

I decided to follow up on the story on a later visit and hired the hunters who had killed the mother tiger with a landmine, after using a cow as bait, and then caught the cubs and sold them via family members living near the main road. We also hired a Vietnamese translator who was going to try to help track down these cubs. We travelled to the area where the mother was killed and then crossed into northern





PHOTOS BY: KARL AMMANN

Fake African rhino Horn with Asian features for sale in Laos.

Vietnam. Our translator, who had also trafficked wildlife and tiger bones in the past, introduced us to some of the well-known dealers in a nearby town. We were offered tiger cake (boiled down from tiger bone), tiger claws and teeth and also a slab of rhino horn marked as weighing 89 grams.

It was then that I realized that wildlife traders in these parts were not just dealing in one product but any wildlife items, which would offer a nice return. Clearly this was a given, with the high profit margins and little risk of there ever being any enforcement of prosecution (tiger bone cake pieces and tiger claws and teeth were in a special sales display in the lobby of the hotel we stayed in, and the menu was full of 'forest food' items). The next morning we sent our translator back to the dealer who had the slab of horn to buy USD 100 of what he said was, and what looked like, rhino horn. The transaction

\$40,000

Price per kg of Asian horns coming mostly from India via Burma and Laos.

\$20,000

Price per kg of African horns.

was documented with a hidden camera and then he invited our man to come to the kitchen where a tiger skeleton was in the process of being boiled down into tiger bone/cake.

It also became clear that, irrespective of tigers, ivory or rhino horn products, the traders we would meet were all potential sources of information for

ALL of these items. So while trying to track down the tiger cubs we also started looking into rhino horn prices, availability, usage, etc.

We then decided to do a survey of the Traditional Chinese Medicine shops in the old town of Hanoi. When it came to rhino horn we were clearly told that it did not have any kind of aphrodisiac qualities and that it did not really cure cancer but that it did reduce fever and cleansed the body, especially after bouts of excessive alcohol, food and drugs. Since this was the start of the new year's festivities, one dealer invited us to his family quarters above the shop for a glass of rice wine and then freely showed us tiger bone cake, claws, a rhino horn, elephant skin etc. After drinking some of the rice wine and again buying a very small sample of what he presented as rhino horn. The lady of the house came with a brown plastic bag which she pulled



PHOTOS BY: KARL AMMANN



SINCE THE ORIGINAL TRIP IN 2010, I HAVE BEEN BACK THREE MORE TIMES CONVINCED THAT VIETNAM IS TODAY ONE OF THE KEY END CONSUMER COUNTRIES FOR RHINO HORN, TIGER BONE AND BEAR BILE PRODUCTS (INCLUDING FARMS WHERE SOUTH KOREAN TOURISTS GO SHOPPING BY THE BUS LOAD).

TOP LEFT: A crate of tiger bones goes for about USD 15.

BOTTOM LEFT: Fake African rhino horn Fake Asian rhino horn and grinding plate.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Some Asian rhino horn tips for sale bottom left and worked into rings like diamonds.

TOP RIGHT: Chinese tourist negotiating for tiger tooth in Laos.

from a top shelf and offered us all a sampling of powdered horn, which she instructed us to sprinkle into our rice wine and explained that, irrespective of our alcohol consumption during the holidays, we would never have a hangover.

The man of the house said that rhino horn was only for the very rich and our guide backed it up with some anecdotes of his own, illustrating that the demand on the Vietnam side was already high and increasing in line with the affluence of some of the elite. Handing out rhino horn had become one way to illustrate that the individual in question ‘had arrived’.

We later confirmed this when talking to dealers who did not want to discuss

selling small samples but were only interested to deal in big piece items in the thousands of dollars. It was clear that they were used to negotiate with people of means and not tourists looking for a few grams. Possession of rhino horn was considered a status symbol on a par with a Mercedes Benz or diamond ring.

We were told that rhino horn pieces were also used to bribe officials and was offered generally as a present to people in power.

Since the original trip in 2010, I have been back three more times convinced that Vietnam is today one of the key end consumer countries for rhino horn, tiger bone and bear bile products (including farms where South Korean



TOP: Some of the very bad fakes. However the elephant tooth underneath is real.

BELOW: There are no real customs checks at the Laos Vietnam border and there was no control of these motorbikes.



PHOTOS BY: KARL AMMANN

tourists go shopping by the bus load). With each trip it became more and more evident that rhino horns on sale appear to be mostly fake (the samples from the first trip when exposed to DNA analysis all turned out to be pieces of a water buffalo horn). So on subsequent trips my translators and I started to become more discriminating and telling dealers that we had been taken for a ride with buffalo horn in the past and

we wanted to see and discuss prices for the real stuff. Our local translator got on the Internet and found 35 players advertising horn via the web. We met some of them. No dealer was worried about enforcement being triggered by offering us a product illegal under national and international laws. But they didn't think we had a lot of money to spend, and were suspicious of foreigners.

So we sent off our local investigator on his own with a hidden camera to do some negotiations to buy horn. We then reviewed the material with him and wrote down a transcript of what was discussed and recorded.

We had now refined our cover story. Our local investigator explained that he was looking for horn for a friend in Yunnan province who had been cheated with fake horn and only wanted very small samples to have it checked out and to come back for more if it turned out to be the real thing. On the last trip we also extended this survey to some

of the main towns in Laos and found that some of the key dealers used the even more relaxed enforcement regime in Laos to handle their imports and then distribute, without any problems, in neighbouring China and Vietnam. Again we found rhino horn in a range of outlets. It all was said to be from Asian animals with many of the sellers insisting there were still Java and Sumatran rhinos in the hill tribe areas of Laos. These animals are officially extinct.

We were shown one complete African horn, which was a good imitation but clearly fake. We deduced that a majority of the horns on sale were fakes. We even filmed in a factory where they prepared the tips of water buffalo horn to make them look more polished and more like rhino horns. We saw dozens of such pieces in the production stage.

We got a lot of very interesting information from these recorded conversations, which included what



TOP: The writer playing with the baby clouded leopards at Boten which started all this.

- A dealer in the north of north Vietnam told us that a drug enforcement unit recently visited him and took some of his horn telling him that he would be paid later, indicating corruption in law enforcement.
- Grinding plates have now also gone “up market”, with a new version made out of Japanese clay which was introduced recently. The pamphlet, which comes with the very fancy packaging, also includes images of a live rhino and promises that horn can ‘cure incurable diseases’.
- The latest gadget is a special contraption that can grind down the horn into powder.
- The main import dealers are well-established businessmen involved in all kinds of related activities including other contraband. ●

During a recent conservation meeting in Bangkok, sponsored by the World Bank, and with Interpol, CITES, and the World Customs Union in attendance, I asked the chair why the Laotian delegate could not be confronted with some of the above evidence and facts (including the open display of ivory in many stores in his country) as proof of the absence of any kind of political will to enforce international conventions such as CITES.

The answer was: Some of these officials attending here are as frustrated as you and I are. The question I did not ask but should have is: Why do we spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on such meetings in five star hotels if the attendees are not decision makers and have no power to help create real political will to mount real enforcement campaigns?

If at this level it is not possible to get “the real decision makers” to attend then what is the point of the meeting in the first place?

appeared to be some of the key dealers. Some of the basic facts that came out via this kind of more informal approach to researching demand and supply characteristics are:

- Rhino horn is openly available, not just in TCM (Traditional Chinese Medicine) shops but also in some jewellery outlets and souvenir markets generally visited by tourists from the region.
- We did not hear of a single case of active enforcement, any prosecution of any hunter or dealer.
- The last indigenous Vietnamese rhino was declared dead shortly before our first visit.
- A lot of dealers know they are handling fake horn products and consider themselves to be ‘legal’.
- Most of the horn on offer tends to be cut slabs or the tips, indicating that it mostly comes from polished and modified water buffalo horns.
- When asked for the easier-to-identify base of the horn, dealers say it is the most valuable part and always sold first and only tips are left.
- Wholesale prices per kilo for a large chunk of a horn were pretty uniform at USD 20,000 for African horn and USD 40,000 for Asian horn.
- TCM dealers trade in small quantities.
- Besides this retail trade for medicine there is a market for big players buying whole horns and having trusted dealers doing the verification for them. These players include the nouveau rich with a Rolls Royce in the car park.