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WILDLIFE WATCH

A Bombshell in the World of Rhinos

Swaziland shocks the global conservation community with a bid to sell rhino horn to Asia.



Seized rhino horns on display at a customs office in Hong Kong.

PHOTOGRAPH BY AARON JAM / GETTY IMAGES

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By **Bryan Christy**

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Less than a week after the South African government announced that international sale of its stockpiled rhino horn was not in the interest of the species, tiny Swaziland, a country surrounded on three sides by South Africa, has put forward an 11th-hour proposal to sell its rhino horn on the international market.

The proposal was submitted at the last minute to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), the body that regulates the wildlife trade. If it passes, it would effectively break the ban on international trade of rhino horn, which has been in place since 1977.

While the conservation value of a trade ban is hotly contested, most major conservation organizations oppose legalizing trade, while those in the rhino ranching industry support it.

Of the five species of rhino left in the world—white, black, Indian, Sumatran, and Javan—the white rhino is by far the most abundant, with roughly 20,000 animals remaining. They're considered a conservation success story, making a comeback from fewer than a hundred by the end of the 19th century. The vast majority—about 19,000—roam South Africa.

But poaching remains a threat to their existence. In 2015, poachers killed a record 1,338 rhinos in Africa for their horns. South Africa saw the loss of 1,175 of its rhinos. While last year's number marked a slight drop in poaching from the year before, the number of rhinos slaughtered in the country has increased each year since 2008.

The primary markets for rhino horn—made of keratin, the same protein as in our hair and fingernails—are China and Vietnam, where it's sold as a panacea for everything from headaches and hangovers to cancer.

This year, the CITES meeting will be held in South Africa, making Swaziland's proposal an especially hard slap, or so it might seem to the uninitiated. But rhino politics are among the most Machiavellian in the animal world, and Swaziland's proposal likely has plenty of advocates in South Africa, a country that is home to a substantial rhino farming industry that has been betting—in huge land, animal, and security investments—that rhino horn trade will one day soon be legalized. South Africa has 330 game ranches that may hold 5,000 rhinos.

If successful, Swaziland's proposal could open a door to other countries, including South Africa and Namibia, to get in on the rhino horn trade. South Africa's government hasn't revealed the size of its rhino horn stockpile, but the Private Rhino Owners Association estimates its members have around six tons and that the government has close to 25 tons, according to a Reuters report.

In its CITES proposal, Swaziland asks permission to sell nearly 730 pounds (330 kilograms) of rhino horn from existing stockpiles to an unnamed number of "licensed retailers" in "the Far East" for \$9.9 million, or \$13,561 per pound. The proposal does not identify buyer countries, something required under CITES rules. Swaziland asks to sell another 44 pounds (20 kilograms) of horn a year by cutting the horns off live rhinos, something that can be done to sedated rhinos. Rhino horns grow back.

Swaziland has just 73 rhinos located in two parks, Hlane Royal National Park and Mkhaya Game Reserve, and a third reserve, the Mlilwane Wildlife Sanctuary. Mlilwane is operated by Big Game Parks, a nonprofit trust run by Ted Reilly, a father of conservation in Swaziland. Big Game Parks is also Swaziland's CITES's representative organization, or management authority, meaning that it represents the country during CITES negotiations.

Recently Big Game Parks made controversial headlines by exporting 17 African elephants to three American zoos. In exchange for the elephants, the American zoos promised to support Big Game Parks's rhinos in the form of payments of \$450,000 over five years, according to Gregg Hudson, president of the Dallas Zoo, in a New York Times report. The money is supposed to be used to support Swaziland's rhino conservation programs.

For Swaziland's proposal to pass, it needs to be approved by two-thirds of the 182 member countries at the CITES meeting in late September and early October. It may have support from at least one other country in the region. Namibia's minister of environment and tourism, Pohamba Shifeta, recently made statements supporting a trade in rhino horn.

Whatever the result, the CITES meeting in Johannesburg from September 24 to October 5 promises a showdown over what is certainly the world's most valuable fingernail, and five endangered species whose futures hang on it.

Bryan Christy is a National Geographic Society fellow and chief correspondent of National Geographic's Special Investigations Unit. He was named National Geographic Explorer of the Year in 2014. Follow him on [Twitter](#).

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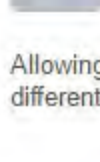


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Despicable

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Allowing farmed sales might actually reduce poaching. Selling a sustainably produced farmed horn is no different than selling velvet from a farmed elk/deer, which are in both Canada and the US

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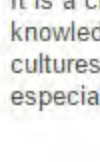


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@David GOODBURN Only that rhinos are just about extinct -_-

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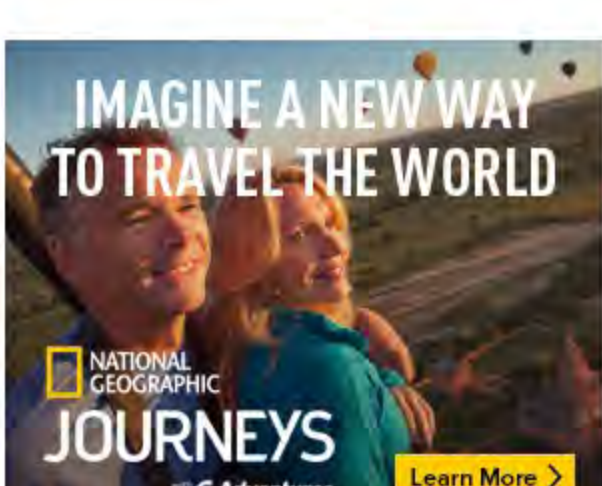


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It is a challenge for me to overcome the anxiety that reading this article evokes. In this era of ever increasing knowledge to which mankind is continually exposed, and even when considering the most backward of cultures, for any society to endorse the maiming and slaughter of a Rhino for the purpose of harvesting its horn, especially for a nonsensically motivated purpose such as "superstition", is unthinkable!

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