Tough on Poaching: The Bleak Fate of the Black Rhino

The sun sets in the west, cowering behind the baobab tree. It rises. The South African savannah awakes from its slumber. Valiant lions and giddy antelope are embraced by a fiery ball of light. A single spotted hyena jerks open its jaw, as a Nile crocodile emerges from a murky river. Mother baboons swat their tails. Zebras and wildebeests frolic at a watering hole. Every animal has its duty, its responsibilities, and its meaning. Every animal is subject to cruelty, hardship, and adversity. But somehow, they all gracefully thrive in a perfectly imperfect system. Today, the savannah is prosperous, but tomorrow, the black rhino is silent. Ever so slightly, the thread of balance begins to unravel.

In 1298, Marco Polo discovered a unicorn. This creature, however, was not a beast of myth, but *Diceros bicornis*, or black rhinoceros. Throughout the 1970s, an estimated 90 percent of the black rhino population was slaughtered by poachers. How could these massive beasts, who grow up to 14 feet tall and weigh up to 3,900 pounds, diminish to a mere 2,500 in number (Kasnoff)? Simply, the answer is their horns. The fatal plight of the black rhino began in the early 1950s, when Mao Zedong, father of the Communist Party of China, began to propagate Traditional Chinese Medicine, or TCM (Platt). "In Traditional Chinese Medicine, the horn, which is shaved or ground into a powder and dissolved in boiling water, is used to treat fever, rheumatism, gout, and other disorders." Correspondingly, in Yemen, the ultimate male status symbol is a curved dagger called "jambiya," composed of translucent black rhino horn and carved with elaborate designs (Rhino). Though the importation of horns to Yemen was banned in the early 80s, jambiya are still coveted items among Middle-Eastern men.

Though efforts *have* been made to prevent rhinoceros poaching, opposing viewpoints hinder substantial progress. The South African Department of Environmental Affairs took a

military approach to rhinoceros poaching. Game rangers have been provided with "better weapons, engaged intelligence analysts, and [instituted] spotter planes, helicopters, and unmanned drones in the air" (Welz). However, anti-poaching activists, such as Peter Knights, executive director of an organization to end illegal wildlife trade called WildAid, feel that simply adding another level of defense is no match for the nationwide issue of rhino poaching. He compares rhino poaching to the War on Drugs—when there is persistence to obtain an illegal product, people will take grave measures to obtain it in any circumstance. (Welz).

In 2010, another solution to rhinoceros poaching, which would ultimately fail, emerged among conservationists. Ed Hern, owner of the Rhino and Lion Reserve near Johannesburg, South Africa, initiated the poisoning of rhino horns when he made a statement claiming that injecting rhino horn with poisonous substances would deter oncoming poachers (Poisoning). The two problematic issues with rhino horn poisoning are that poachers are not dissuaded with poisonous rhino horns, and consumers are not dissuaded with using poisonous rhino horns in medicinal practices. "The poisoning process involves the drilling of holes directly into the rhino's horns and then infusing them with highly toxic ectoparasiticides...although ectoparasiticides are not lethal to humans in small quantities, they may cause toxicity" (Poisoning). No matter how many obscure, undesirable horn adaptations surface among innovative scientists, the rhinoceros horn is nevertheless a Dead Sea Scroll among the acquisitive. Additionally, it is near impossible to poison and re-poison rhino horns every four years or so (Poisoning). If faced with an obstacle, poachers will find less progressive game parks to make their kills in. Furthermore, no substantial evidence of harm among poisoned rhino horn users have been found. It is also unlikely that any believer in the spiritual qualities of TCM would be deterred from using rhino horn that could possibly do them harm. If unharmed, "they

may believe that they have 'conquered' the poison, or that the rhino horn is so 'magical' that it has counteracted the poison itself, and they will continue to buy rhino horn believing in its curative properties". The cherry on top? In a study conducted by several of South Africa's acclaimed wildlife conservationists, it was found that in fact, the poison injected in the rhino horns only stays in the drilling holes, rather than infusing into the whole horn (Poisoning). Rhino horn poisoning is a solution lacking results.

In 1977, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITIES) placed an international ban on rhino horn trade. In 2009, a domestic ban was placed on trade. As astounding as it may seem, rhino breeders and game reserve owners feel that the only feasible solution to end rhino poaching would be to lift that domestic ban. Dehorning live rhinos in a painless process, and legally selling that horn will drive individual poachers away from a government dominated market (Quirn). Ultimately, there would be a greater demand for live rhinos, and the demand for poaching would subside. However, anti-trade activists believe removing the domestic ban on rhino horn trade will only promote trade in the black market. They feel that this proposal is supported by "greed, not conservation" (Quirn). The next CITIES meeting is planned for 2016. Removing the domestic ban on rhino horn trade will be a fiercely debated issue.

Although rhinoceroses are herbivores, their massive size categorizes them as alpha predators and keystone species. When they graze on savannah grass, consequently, they are increasing plant and animal diversity in regions with high rhino populations (Goldman). Rhinos are selective about what they graze on. When they consume only certain plant species, the scarce plant species prosper. Consequently, diverse flora attracts diverse fauna (Goldman). Without rhinoceros, the African ecosystem would teeter off balance.

Adam Mohr, a guide and ranger at Umlani Bush Camp, South Africa, parallels rhino poaching to the War on Drugs. "You can hire special agents, helicopters, guard dogs, high security radios... but you can't stop the demand for horns." The "Mafia of The Savannah", Mohr associates rhinoceros poaching with modern organized crime. "It's the Chinese, the poor South Africans or Mozambiquens who physically do the poaching," says Mohr as he tightens his wide brimmed hat to shield the African sun, "but it's the Mafia-type people who run the underworld..." When questioned by several of his clients regarding the education of cultures with high poaching rates, Mohr responds with despondency. "It's near impossible to remove such a vital and engrained aspect of any culture. That's why education is ineffective... you can try all you want, but the traditionally Chinese can't give up poaching." An expression of reservation radiates from Mohr when he describes a Vietnamese politician, who "claimed that rhino horn cured his cancer." After the unnamed Politician made such a gratuitous statement in 2008, the number of poached rhinos per year in Vietnam skyrocketed from 83 to 688 in a mere 4 years (Platt). "In the end," says Mohr, "this politician indirectly caused the extinction of the Javan Rhino in Vietnam." Mohr drives away, the Land Rover aiming straight for the setting sun.

In a society dominated by chat bubbles, like buttons, and emoji's, it is crucial to approach pressing issues in methods appealing to the younger generation. To bring about the most change, I formulated a plan that would cater to a dynamic, innovative generation—I decided to use social media. From here, I created a twitter titled @Rhino_Now, where I work to educate teens about rhino poaching and the importance of conservation. I also provide links to accredited rhino conservation groups, and encourage my followers to donate. Although Rhino Now is still in its infancy, in the future, I hope to organize fundraisers, rhino oriented events, and further educate the future generation about efforts to prevent the demise of this beloved species.

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This summer, on a trip to South Africa and Swaziland, I encountered a female black rhino. Nothing—not the innovation of the CITIES proposal, nor the mystics of Traditional Chinese Medicine—could match the raw beauty of the rhinoceros, humbly grazing in the Swaziland savannah, completely oblivious to the plight of her very own species. Throughout this experience, I have absorbed and analyzed every piece of information about rhino poaching. Yet, I have never felt more distant from an animal that I came to know so well. Any accredited scientist can observe the rhinoceros in their natural habitat. Likely, he/she will come to a fundamental discovery concerning the rhino. Yet, it is near impossible to truly understand the complexity of the black rhinoceros. They have their own practices, their own hierarchy, and their own lifestyle. How can one slaughter them, breaking apart parent and child and brother and sister, without an ounce of guilt? How can one wrench off their horns, and cherish them as displays of wealth? The sun did set in the west, but at dawn, the sun must rise in the east. And one day, it will shine upon the black rhino.

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