

Threats to rhinos

Rhinos have become increasingly endangered. At the turn of the 19th century, there were about one million rhinos living across the world. In 1970, there were only around 70,000 left. Today, there are fewer than 29,000 rhinos surviving in the wild. The story today differs from species to species, and from country to country.

Wild rhinos are threatened by:

- Habitat loss
- Human encroachment
- Climate change
- Political conflict
- Poaching (illegal killing) of rhino for their horns.
This is currently the biggest threat to rhinos.

All of the five remaining rhino species are under threat

In detail: the rhino poaching crisis

Rhino horn is made of a substance called keratin which is also found in human hair and nails. Rhino horn has long been used in Traditional Chinese Medicine to treat a variety of conditions including fevers, epilepsy and arthritis.

Ever-shifting peaks of trade between China, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan meant that between 1970 and 1985, almost 85% of the world's rhino population was killed. By the mid 1990s, virtually all countries had rhino horn trade bans in place and rhino numbers started to recover worldwide. Between 1990-2005, on average only 14 rhinos were poached each year in South Africa.

Over the past few years demand for rhino horn from Asian countries has soared, despite rhino horn having no proven medicinal benefits. The recent surge in demand is thought to be because of an increasing number of wealthy consumers in Vietnam, a country which in 2011 saw its own Javan rhino population declared extinct. Several new types of users have been identified who use rhino horn for non-traditional purposes; some believe it is a miracle cancer cure, or that it has 'detoxification properties' following the excessive consumption of alcohol or rich food.

The rhino poaching crisis in South Africa has reached an unprecedented level, with increasingly ruthless organised criminal syndicates supplying Asian countries with valuable rhino horn. Those involved in rhino poaching will employ merciless tactics to shoot the rhino and saw off its horns, often while the animal is still alive. While the trade in rhino horn is illegal in Vietnam, once the horn enters the Vietnamese market, the country's weak legislation and penalties around illegal wildlife trade mean that dealers and users get away with their criminal offences.

Since 2006, over 4,400 rhinos have been poached across Africa

with rhino poaching increasing dramatically since 2010. In 2014, at least 1,089 rhinos were killed in Africa: that's one poached every 8 hours. Most of these rhinos were killed in South Africa. The graph to the right shows the rapid increase in South African poaching over the past seven years.

India is also experiencing an increase in poaching, with criminals targeting rhinos in National Parks. This shows that the poaching problem is not limited to African rhino species.

