



21 August 2017

### **RHINO HORNS UNDER VIRTUAL HAMMER: COMMENT ON THE PROPOSED ONLINE RHINO HORN AUCTION**

*Start*

The Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) is watching with trepidation the brazen online rhino horn auction ([www.rhinohornauction.com](http://www.rhinohornauction.com)) that was supposed to open today on Monday, 21 August 2017. John Hume, who is auctioning off 264 horns that have been harvested from rhinos that he farms, has undertaken a long battle with the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA) to legalise this auction. Initially, he took DEA to the High Court and won, which ultimately led to the moratorium on the domestic trade in rhino horn being lifted, on the 30 March 2017. Then, yesterday, he was back in the High Court with an urgent appeal to get DEA to issue permits for his online auction. He reportedly was called by DEA and told that they had issued the permits, but DEA argued that the issuing official did not have the authority to do so, and thus the permits could not be released. He won this case too, and DEA will be issuing the permits to let his online auction start at midday today as planned; DEA will also be paying his legal costs. Hume has now won twice against DEA in court and both times on legal technicalities, not on the merit of the conservation motive. Today, minutes before the online auction was due to open, it has been postponed until Wednesday at 14:00 – allegedly to allow time for further permits to be issued.

The online auction has also faced backlash from hacktivists known as Anonymous, who sabotaged [www.rhinohornauction.com](http://www.rhinohornauction.com) on 9 August 2017 and claimed to have taken control of all files and defaced the page. The page has since be reinstated. In all, five webpages were taken down by Anonymous in protest to this auction including [www.thepresidencey.gov.za](http://www.thepresidencey.gov.za) and news sites African News Network 7 (ANN7) and The New Age (TNA).

The EWT is very concerned that the legal trade in rhino horn will:

- lead to laundering of illegal rhino horn into legal domestic trade, and that rhino horn (sourced both legally and illegally) will find its way into the illegal international market;

- tarnish South Africa's international conservation reputation and potentially drive rhino populations to extinction in neighbouring countries and other range states;
- increase existing challenges in compliance and enforcement and nurture corruption; and
- increase consumer demand, leading to an upsurge in rhino poaching to satisfy a demand that cannot be met.

The EWT is further concerned that there are serious challenges with the monitoring and regulation of this trade, including:

- The expertise and capacity to implement, enforce and monitor legal compliance in respect of rhino and rhino horn specific permits are, for the most part, lacking.
- Current legislation is insufficient, as acknowledged by the Minister of Environmental Affairs (Minister Edna Molewa moves to restate government position regarding the domestic trade in rhino horn, 17 August 2017 [https://www.environment.gov.za/mediarelease/molewa\\_restategovernmentpositionondomesticrhinohorntrade](https://www.environment.gov.za/mediarelease/molewa_restategovernmentpositionondomesticrhinohorntrade)). Although she states that other regulatory measures are being put in place, these are, however, all in draft format and several months away from implementation.
- No effective permit monitoring system is in place; the proposed electronic permitting system is, to the best of our knowledge, not fully functional and has not been tested in real-life situations.

Furthermore, the EWT is concerned about the possible negative consequences for the fight against organised crime in South Africa, in that:

- The illegal trade in rhino horn has been linked to transnational organised crime; legalising the trade will, in effect, make it easier for these criminals to operate within South Africa.
- South Africa is putting considerable effort into disrupting and dismantling wildlife trafficking networks in the country and beyond, and these activities must not be damaged or compromised. It is of grave concern that a legal trade in rhino horn in South Africa may facilitate these syndicates to operate under the auspices of legal trade.

The premise that the sale of rhino horn will remove pressure from wild populations and provide an avenue for satisfying some demand in a legal manner is not based on any published research. There is very little known about levels of consumer demand, illegal trade routes, and the effects of legal trade on these, and, as such, the risk of unintended consequences is unacceptably high.

We believe that everything in our power must be done to protect our rhinos, but that the priorities should be focused on activities that will have long-term positive impacts on the conservation of rhinos, including breaking transnational organised crime networks, reducing demand for horn, and improving border security. The rhino horn auction taking place today contributes to none of these priorities. The sale of rhino horn does not address the issues faced by rhinos in the long term and may even escalate demand and poaching.

*End*

## Contacts

Dr Kelly Marnewick

Senior Trade Officer

Wildlife in Trade Programme

Endangered Wildlife Trust

Tel: 082 477 4470 or 011 372 3600 ext 594

Email: [kellym@ewt.org.za](mailto:kellym@ewt.org.za)

Belinda Glenn

Marketing and Communications Manager

Endangered Wildlife Trust

Tel: 011 372 3600 ext 110

Email: [belindag@ewt.org.za](mailto:belindag@ewt.org.za)