

United States Attorney's Office

Northern District of Iowa



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PRESS RELEASE

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Cedar Rapids, Iowa

Maquoketa Man Sentenced to More Than Two Years in Federal Prison for Illegally Trafficking in Black Rhino Horns

A man who illegally bought and transported black rhino horns from Oregon to Iowa was sentenced in federal court yesterday to more than two years in federal prison.

James Hess, age 39, from Maquoketa, Iowa, received the prison term after a May 13, 2015, guilty plea to one count of violating the Lacey Act, which prohibits trafficking in certain wildlife, including wildlife determined to be endangered under the Endangered Species Act. All species of black rhinos are endangered and it is illegal to traffic in black rhino horns across state lines.

In a plea agreement, Hess, who is a taxidermist, admitted that he contacted an individual in Oregon trying to sell a pair of black rhino horns online. Hess reached an agreement with the seller in Oregon and personally traveled to Oregon to get the horns. Hess told the seller he was reselling the horns to an individual living in Oregon. Hess presented the seller with an Oregon driver's license purporting to be for the buyer of the horns. In reality, that individual had no involvement in the deal. After getting the horns, Hess shipped them back to Iowa and then gave them to Wade Steffen, a Texas resident, who shipped the horns to California. Steffen gave Hess a portion of the profit Steffen expected to make from selling the horns in California.

Rhinoceros are herbivores of prehistoric origin and among the largest remaining mega-fauna on earth. They have no known predators other than humans. All species of rhinoceros are protected under United States and international law, and black rhinoceros are endangered. Since 1976, trade in rhinoceros horn has been regulated under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), a treaty signed by 180 countries around the world to protect fish, wildlife and plants that are or may become imperiled due to the

demands of international markets. Nevertheless, the demand for rhinoceros horn and black market prices have skyrocketed in recent years due to the value that some cultures have placed on ornamental carvings, good luck charms or alleged medicinal purposes, leading to a decimation of global rhinoceros populations. As a result, rhino populations have declined by more than 90 percent since 1970. South Africa, for example, has witnessed a rapid escalation in poaching, rising from 13 in 2007 to 668 in 2012.

The United States Attorney for the Northern District of Iowa, Kevin W. Techau, stated, “This office is committed to protecting the environment and natural resources of our country and world. Cases like this one are important steps in curbing the market for black rhino horns and ensuring the survival of the species across the world.”

“This conviction and sentencing demonstrates the resolve of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to eliminate the illegal trade of Rhino horns in the United States,” said Edward Grace, Deputy Chief of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Office of Law Enforcement. “Illegal wildlife trafficking is not just a problem in faraway countries but as demonstrated by this investigation can be found here in the heartland of America. The goal of "Operation Crash" is to eliminate this illegal market in the United State so that Rhino do not become extinct and continue to be a species that survives in the wild.”

Hess was sentenced in Cedar Rapids by United States District Court Chief Judge Linda R. Reade. During the sentencing hearing, Chief Judge Reade stated of Hess that “by his actions he helped establish a market for these black rhino horns and that’s a serious offense against the planet.” Hess was sentenced to twenty-seven months’ imprisonment. A special assessment of \$100 was imposed. He must also serve a three-year term of supervised release after the prison term. There is no parole in the federal system.

The case was prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Anthony Morfitt and was investigated by the Department of Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service, Special Investigations Unit (SIU) as a part of “Operation Crash,” a nationwide effort to investigate and prosecute those involved in the black market trade of endangered rhino horns. “Operation Crash” is a continuing investigation by the Department of the Interior’s Fish and Wildlife Service, with assistance from other federal and local law enforcement agencies.

Court file information is available at <https://ecf.iand.uscourts.gov/>. The case file number is 15-CR-41.

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