

Rhino Horn Burn San Diego Zoo Frequently Asked Questions

During a Sept. 8, 2016, ceremony, confiscated rhino horn items with an estimated black market value of approximately \$1 million -- including whole horns, ornate objects and items falsely marketed as medicinals -- were destroyed by burning at the San Diego Zoo Safari Park. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service partnered with the zoo and California Department of Fish and Wildlife to stage the symbolic event, the first of its kind in the nation.

Why is rhino horn being destroyed?

The demand for rhino horn is driving poaching that is decimating rhino populations. Poaching to supply trade in rhino horns threatens the survival of the world's rhinos. Africa's rhinos were beginning to recover in some countries until an upsurge of trafficking in horns occurred within the past decade.

It is illegal to trade in rhino horns in interstate commerce within the United States, and it is also illegal to trade commercially across international borders, with very limited exceptions. The majority of the rhino horn destroyed at this event was contraband, seized from illegal activities. Like drugs and counterfeit items seized in trade, these items could never be re-sold. We believe destroying rhino horn sends a strong signal to the rest of the world that the United States will not tolerate wildlife trafficking.

Has the United States ever destroyed rhino horn?

This is the first time the United States has destroyed rhino horn. During the past few years, we destroyed approximately seven tons of elephant ivory in two crush events (in November 2013 and June 2015). The ivory destroyed had been seized at U.S. ports of entry and as a result of law enforcement investigations for violation of U.S. laws.

Why weren't the horns destroyed when they were seized?

Rhinoceros horn and other wildlife products seized in law enforcement operations are maintained as evidence until criminal and civil cases are concluded and the property has been forfeited. Once cases are resolved, the Service uses items that are examples of illegal wildlife trade for many purposes including future use in investigations, educational purposes, and for training our law enforcement officers and wildlife detection dogs.

Why is the rhino horn being burned instead of crushed?

Because rhino horn is ground up to be consumed for alleged medicinal purposes, grinding it or crushing it does not effectively destroy its black market value. Burning ensures it is rendered useless for any form of trade.

What will happen to the material left over from the burn?

Ashes and other material left over from the burn will be sent to the [National Wildlife Property Repository](#) in Colorado.

How did the Service acquire these rhino horns and rhino horn products?

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Rhino horn pieces from the Safari Park, removed for medical or other management reasons, were included in the burn. These pieces represent southern white rhinos, black rhinos and greater one-horned rhinos. However, the majority of rhino horn products being destroyed represent confiscated items. The Service acquired the confiscated rhino horn and rhinoceros products through seizures associated with illegal activity. Many of the products were seized during federal search warrant executions. Other products were seized as they were being smuggled into or from the United States at international ports of entry.

What types of laws were broken in connection with these seizures?

Our investigations are associated with many different federal laws and regulations. These can include federal laws related to conspiracy, money laundering, wire fraud and smuggling, as well as wildlife laws such as the Endangered Species Act, Lacey Act and Rhinoceros and Tiger Conservation Act.

The majority of the medicinals were seized by Service wildlife inspectors. These types of seizures can result from illegal import or export or from passengers who are not aware these products are illegal to be brought into the United States.

The confiscated rhino horns and the products carved from rhino horn that are included in the burn were seized from two investigations that were part of “Operation Crash.” Operation Crash, named for the term for a herd of rhinos, is a Service-led, ongoing, international criminal investigation that was created in response to the international poaching of rhino horn and elephant ivory. In one of the investigations, a subject from China was sentenced to serve 70 months in federal prison for leading an international wildlife smuggling conspiracy in which at least 30 rhinoceros horns and numerous objects made from rhino horn and elephant ivory were smuggled from the United States to China. Before he was arrested in Miami, the subject had purchased two endangered black rhinoceros horns from a Service undercover agent. During the court proceeding, he admitted that he was the “boss” of three antique dealers in the United States who he had paid to help obtain and smuggle wildlife items to him via Hong Kong.

The second investigation involved an antiques dealer in Manhattan who, under the guise of providing the Service with information about illegal rhino horn activity, was actually involved himself with trafficking illegal rhino horn. At the same time he was providing information to the Service, he was attempting to illegally purchase a black rhinoceros shoulder mount himself from someone he met online. Unknown to him, this seller in Illinois was actually a Service undercover agent. The subject asked the agent to supply him with false documentation to avoid possible detection by the Service. Before departing Illinois, the subject cut off the horns from the black rhino mount and shipped them back to New York. At the time of his arrest, four rhinoceros heads, six black rhinoceros horns, numerous carved and partially carved rhinoceros horns, fake rhinoceros horns and cash were seized from his New York residence.

Have other countries destroyed rhino horn stockpiles?

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Yes. The first public burning of rhino horn was in January 1990 in Kenya, where some 270 horns are believed to have been burned as a symbolic protest against the trade in endangered wildlife. On Sept. 21, 2014, the Czech Republic destroyed approximately 132 pounds of rhino horn at the Dvůr Králové Zoo. Several nations showed solidarity with the Czech Republic on the same day or shortly thereafter, amplifying the message; Slovakia, Great Britain, Estonia, and Poland burned confiscated horn, horn from natural mortality, or replicas of rhino horn. On April 30, 2016, Kenya destroyed one ton of rhino horn along with 105 tons of elephant ivory in the largest burn of illegal wildlife products to date.

Why doesn't the Service sell the rhino horn?

It is illegal to sell rhino horn in interstate or foreign commerce, and it is illegal to sell seized, illegally obtained rhino horn and ivory anywhere. As a signatory to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), the United States complies with Resolution Conf. 9.10 (Rev. CoP15), [adopted by CITES Parties in 1994, and updated in 2010], which recommends that:

Parties dispose of confiscated and accumulated dead specimens of Appendix-I species, including parts and derivatives, only for bona fide scientific, educational, enforcement or identification purposes, and save in storage or destroy specimens whose disposal for these purposes is not practicable.

Are rhinos protected by law?

Yes, rhinos are protected by U.S. law, by international treaty, and by national laws in most countries where they occur.

In the United States, all rhino species are listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The Southern white rhinoceros is listed as threatened. All other African rhinos (northern white rhino and black rhino) and all Asian rhinos (Sumatran, Javan and greater one-horned) are listed as endangered. In the most general terms, the ESA prohibits the import, export, interstate commerce or foreign commerce of any listed species, including its parts or products, without a permit.

In addition, the 1994 Rhinoceros and Tiger Conservation Act and the 1996 Rhino and Tiger Product Labelling Act provide funds for protection in the wild and prohibit trading products labelled as containing ingredients derived from rhinos or tigers.

CITES lists species in three appendices, Appendix I providing the highest levels of trade protection, with appendices II and III providing progressively lower levels. All rhinoceros species were listed in CITES Appendix I in 1977. The populations of southern white rhino in South Africa and in Swaziland were downlisted to Appendix II (in 1995 and 2005, respectively) with an annotation to allow international trade in live animals to appropriate and acceptable destinations and in hunting trophies from those two countries. Commercial trade in horn is prohibited.

What is the Service doing to protect rhino populations in the wild?

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Money allocated by Congress annually to the Rhinoceros and Tiger Conservation Fund allows the Service to provide essential technical and financial support to help countries in Africa and Asia restore rhino and tiger populations to healthy numbers in the wild. In the last five years, the fund provided approximately \$7.2 million, leveraged by approximately \$18.6 million in matching funds, to support on-the-ground conservation of rhinos in Africa and Asia. Since 1994, the fund has supported anti-poaching patrols and operations, habitat management, establishment of new reserves and new populations, developing community conservation initiatives, and raising public awareness.

The Service also is conducting investigations tracing wildlife-related crimes involving Americans, conducted within the United States, or shipped through the United States. These operations disrupt organized crime rings and cartels that are benefiting from the illegal trade in rare species. Assets such as cash, jewelry, gold and other possessions belonging to convicted traffickers were forfeited to the government with the proceeds used for conservation projects in Africa. Such funds have been spent to protect southern black rhinos in North Luangwa in Zambia, and to enable the restoration of eastern black rhinos to a community area in Northern Kenya.

Since 2014, we have deployed Service law enforcement senior special agents in Africa and in Asia to assist with ongoing investigations and interdictions overseas and to strengthen the capacity of partners in some of the areas most affected by or implicated in wildlife trafficking.

Why are rhino populations at risk?

Since the colonial era, rhinos have gone extinct in 15 African countries. Black and white rhinos were hunted to precariously low numbers throughout Africa by the early 1960s and 1970s but ambitious anti-poaching campaigns and reintroduction programs allowed population increases and reintroductions to sites where they had gone extinct. However, more recently, the poaching of rhinos for their horns has once again surged upward in Africa. Rhino poaching has also shifted from opportunistic poaching done by locals to coordinated, targeted poaching commissioned by organized networks or syndicates who are believed to be moving most of the horn, and are often involved in trafficking of other illegal substances as well.

Less than a decade ago, South Africa, which has more than 80 percent of Africa's rhinos, was losing about 20 rhinos each year to poaching. In 2015, 1,175 rhinos were killed in South Africa alone (home to the largest remaining populations of the species).

Currently, there are approximately 5,000 black rhinos and 20,000 white rhinos in Africa. In Asia, the status of both rhinos and tigers is also precarious. Although there has been some conservation success with the greater one-horned rhino, which now numbers nearly 3,000 individuals, there are only about 100 Sumatran and 60 Javan rhinos left in the wild, primarily in Indonesia.

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Why has demand for rhino horn surged in recent years?

In the past five years, the poaching of rhinos for their horns has surged in response to increased demand for horn in east and southeast Asia and particularly Vietnam and China. Rhino horn has been used in traditional medicines in some cultures, even though no unique or particularly effective medicinal properties can be scientifically attributed to the substance. Rhino horn is made of keratin, like human hair and finger nails. In the past few years, consuming rhino horn was considered a display of success and wealth. In addition, objects such as libation cups made of rhino horn are desired by some as a status symbol. Once used primarily as a fever reducer, it is now being marketed as a cure for everything from cancer to hangovers.