



the growing demand in Asia; rhino horn also made its way to the Arabian Peninsula, where it was used to fashion the handles of traditional Yemeni daggers.

It was in Kenya's south, in the Tsavo National Park, that the war against rhinos reached its nadir – the park's rhino population fell from 9000 in 1969 to less than 100 in 1980.

Since then, rhino numbers have rebounded thanks to a combination of legal protection – the trade in rhino horn was declared illegal under the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) in 1975 – and beefed-up security.

When I visited the Tsavo West Ngulia Rhino Sanctuary three decades after the massacre, I was met by guards in full military fatigues and armed with machineguns. “These rhinos in here,” one guard told me, “they receive more protection than many African presidents.”

Kenya's population of black rhinos grew to about 600, with the continent-wide figure thought to be 10 times that number. Efforts to save the white rhino proved even more successful, with more than 20,000 in South Africa alone. A corner had been turned, it seemed, and the battle to save the rhino was counted among the great conservation success stories of our time.

And then Vietnam acquired a taste for rhino horn.

In 2007, 13 rhinos were killed in South Africa. In the years that followed, the rate of killing grew steadily. From 2007 to 2009, one quarter of Zimbabwe's 800 rhinos were killed,

and Botswana's rhino population has fallen to just 38. In South Africa, home to 90 per cent of the world's white rhinos, armed guards patrol the parks.

Even so, 448 rhinos were killed in 2011. The following year, the number rose to 668. In the first 65 days of 2013, poachers killed 146 rhinos. At current rates the figure for this year will be close to 830.

As a result, rhino populations could soon reach a tipping point that may prove difficult to reverse. The rhino death rate will exceed its birth rate within two years on current trends, according to Dr Mike Knight, chairman of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's African Rhino Specialist Group. “We would then be eating into rhino capital.”

Chief scientist of South Africa's National Parks Hector Magome agrees: “If poaching continues, the rhino population will decline significantly by 2016.”

The importance of saving Africa's black and white rhinos is given added weight by the negligible numbers for the world's other three surviving rhino species – the almost 3000 Indian rhinos live in highly fragmented populations, while just 220 Sumatran and fewer than 45 Javan rhinos survive. Vietnam's last population of Javan rhinos was declared extinct in October 2011.

It is proving far easier to quantify the threats faced by Africa's rhinos than it is to arrest the decline for one simple reason: what worked in the past no longer holds.

The recent upsurge in poaching has taken place in spite of the CITES

regime of international legal protection. Security is also tighter than it has ever been.

In South Africa's Kruger National Park, home to almost half the world's white rhinos, 650 rangers patrol an area the size of Israel or Wales. This falls well short of the one-ranger-per-10-square-kilometres ratio recommended by international experts, and more than 100 rhinos have already been killed in Kruger this year.

Thus, those charged with saving the rhino are considering radical and hitherto unimaginable solutions. One such approach gaining traction is the controversial plan to legalise the trade in rhino horn, dehorn thousands of rhinos and flood the market with newly legal horns.

Were this to happen, supporters of the proposal say, the price of rhino horn – which reached \$65,000 a kilogram in 2012 – would fall, and the incentive for poaching would diminish.

Dehorning has long been opposed by conservationists – rhinos use their horns to defend themselves and while feeding. But the failure of all other methods has convinced some that the time has come to contemplate the unthinkable.

“The current situation is failing,” Dr Duan Biggs, of the University of Queensland and one of the leading advocates for legalising the trade in horns, said recently. “The longer we wait to put in place a legal trade, the more rhinos we lose.”

Dr Biggs and others point to the legalisation of the trade in crocodile

products as an example of how such a plan could work.

Critics counter that any legalisation of the trade in rhino horns is unenforceable. They also argue that lax or ineffective legal controls in Vietnam – where trading in rhino horn is already illegal – and elsewhere ensure that it will be impossible to separate legally obtained rhino horns from those supplied by poachers.

“We don't think it would stop the poaching crisis,” says Dr Colman O'Cruidain, of the World Wildlife Fund. “We think the legal trade could make it worse.”

The debate about saving rhinos is riddled with apparent contradictions:

Twenty-four-hour watch: An anti-poaching team guards a de-horned northern white rhinoceros in Kenya in 2011.

Photo: Brent Stirton

‘These rhinos in here, they receive more protection than many African presidents.’

Rhinoceros guard

that we must consider disfiguring rhinos if we are to save them; that rhino numbers have not been this high in half a century but the risk of their extinction has never been greater.

And so it is that the story of the rhinoceros has reached a crossroads. It is a story that pits, on one side, a creature that has adapted to everything millions of years of evolution have thrown at it, against, on the other, the humans that will either drive the species to extinction or take the difficult decisions necessary to save it.

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