THE OTHER SIDE OF RHINO CONSERVATION

SAVING RHINOS FROM EXTINCTION REQUIRES PEOPLE TO STOP BUYING THEIR HORNS, BUT THE SCIENCE OF DEMAND REDUCTION IS A COMPLEX BUSINESS, REPORTS JAMES FAIR.

The announcement in May of this year that the governments of the USA and Vietnam were launching a new partnership to tackle wildlife crime sounded like good news, but not everybody was convinced.

"I know several conservation organisations have applied for some of this money for what they call demand reduction campaigns," says behaviour-change consultant Lynn Johnson. "I hope this money is not wasted."

In her spare time, Johnson is also the founder of Breaking The Brand, a campaign group she set up to stigmatise the use of rhino horn in the top echelons of the Vietnamese business world.

Everybody agrees that the consumption of rhino horn has gone beyond seeking a cure for cancer or other life-threatening diseases. While there is still a link to its supposed medicinal properties, the real reason for purchasing rhino horn in Vietnam is to enhance your social standing. There's also some suggestion that horns are traded purely as investments. Most purchasers are wealthy and powerful businessmen.

WRONG TARGETS?

The problem, says Johnson, is a lot of the campaigning being done in Vietnam doesn't target this elite demographic.

She points to the recent 'nail chewers' campaign (*right*), in which Vietnamese celebrities highlight the fact that rhino horn is made of the same substance as fingernails and therefore couldn't cure hiccoughs.

While this will raise awareness among young people who take note of what celebrities say, it won't, Johnson claims, reduce demand for rhino horn. High-level businessmen are influenced by corporate leaders such as Bill Gates and Richard Branson, not by actors, singers or sports stars.

In contrast, adverts developed by Breaking The Brand – thanks to the pro bono work of professional contacts of Johnson's in Australia – portray scenes of what an actual buyer of rhino horn might do with it (*see box, above right*).

DEMAND REDUCTION STRATEGIES

Breaking The Brand wants to make the buying, giving or receiving of rhino horn culturally unacceptable in Vietnam. In the advert above, a senior executive indicates to a colleague that he won't accept the gift of a rhino horn. The message to aspiring businessmen is that trying to use rhino horn to enhance your career prospects will backfire on you. In contrast, the 'nail chewers' campaign (*left*) is a softer message that only highlights the fact that rhino horn has no medicinal properties.

Many Vietnamese businessmen still see rhino horns as potent talismanic objects.

BUSINESS ETHICS

Whatever the ads do, they don't raise awareness about the plight of the rhino. "When I started speaking to businessmen in Hanoi, they talked openly about why they used rhino horn," says Johnson. "The only reason for giving up rhino horn, they said, was if it affected their health or status. One said he would happily buy a horn from the last-ever rhino."

Richard Thomas, of Traffic, the wildlife-trade monitoring group, goes further. "Some users told us that even pictures of dead rhinos were likely to inspire people to want to use horns," he says. "[They think] 'That's a powerful animal, I want a piece of it.' NGO logos on materials should also be avoided because people think, 'You're paid to say that.'"

Traffic is working with the government, business sector and civil society to develop its 'chī' initiative. The idea is to encourage rhino horn users to believe their strength comes from within – their 'chī' – not from consuming or buying rhino horn. "Our job is to understand consumers, not judge them," says Gayle Burgess, Traffic's behaviour change specialist. "They may not share our personal values, but we still need to understand their motivation."

TRADE PROPOSALS

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) is gathering during September and October for its 17th 'Conference of the Parties' in Johannesburg, South Africa, and the issue of rhino and elephant poaching will be to the fore.

There'll be proposals to tackle demand in consumer countries, as well as one – from Swaziland – that's calling for the trade in rhino horn to be legalised, so that the profits from it accrue to legitimate businessmen with a stake in conserving the animals, not the ruthless poachers that currently benefit.

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Conservationists fear how this would affect their demand-reduction work. If trade were legalised (even if only for horns deriving from rhinos in Swaziland), it would still legitimise users' behaviour.

Those in favour of trade liberalisation argue that it is almost a last-gasp solution. "Despite spending billions annually on trying to collapse the illegal demand, it's not working," Pelham Jones of South Africa's Private Owners Association said last year.

But if Lynn Johnson is right, then it's not billions or millions or even hundreds of thousands of pounds that are being spent on reducing demand – in the case of Breaking The Brand, it's just £60,000. The question now is whether and how this figure can be increased to have a lasting and significant impact on those people in the Far East who fuel the killing of rhinos and elephants in Africa's savannahs and rainforests.

Horns are either sold whole (*above*) or made into a variety of products.

Rhinos: Ann&Steve Toon/robertharding/Alamy; tailbling; WildAid; business: breakingthebrand.org; confiscated: Kin Cheung/AP Photo; products: Jim Brandenburg/Minden/FLPA