

RHINO HORN TRADE Is Alive And Well In Taiwan

Recent WWF-funded research shows the magnitude of the rhino horn trade in Taiwan is even greater than previously thought. The study, done as part of the WWF's Stop the Rhino Horn Trade campaign, reveals thousands of pharmacies selling rhino horn and up to 10 tonnes of stock. This extract from a report by Lesa Griffith:



DI HWA street is a dark little thoroughfare that runs behind Taipei's train station. It is the city's wholesale district where pharmacy owners come to buy their natural medicinal materials.

Along the pothole-pocked sidewalks are big, chaotic stores filled with bins of dried mushrooms and lizards. Stuffed tigers and jars of mysterious organic matter fill some windows. Other shops sell only herbs and candy. From here rhino horn goes to shops all over the island.

Last year 43 investigators, ranging from college students to concerned retirees, conducted widespread and detailed surveys of Taiwan's traditional medicine market to get the lowdown on rhino horn stocks and uses. The surveyors' result: There may be up to 10 tonnes of rhino horn – equivalent to about 4 000 dead rhinos – stockpiled in Taiwan.

At the current retail val-

ue, 10 tonnes of rhino horn is worth more than US\$70 million. This does not include smugglers' stockpiles, carvings and medicinal factory stockpiles. The team in Taipei believes that up to 80 percent of this is still in whole horn form.

"If Taiwan's total number of traditional pharmacies is approximately 13 663, it means that 77 percent of them deal in rhino horn," says Kristen Nowell, Acting Director of the Trade Records Analysis of Fauna and Flora in Commerce (TRAFFIC) office in Taipei.

"It means that it is already too late to outlaw the sale of rhino horn in the country," says Nowell. "There is too much horn on the market. It is too easy to sell. The police here cannot go out and bust thousands of pharmacies for possession of rhino horn. It just wouldn't work."

In the past decade the price of rhino horn has almost quadrupled in Taiwan. Chinese businessmen see the horn as a good investment and are

stockpiling it as a commodity, rather than a medicine. According to the WWF report "the perceived imminent extinction of the rhino" boosts its investment attraction even further.

"Many of the stockpiles are just sitting there for investment purposes," says Jorgen Thomsen, director of TRAFFIC international. "And they are going to be put on the market very slowly when horn reaches a peak selling price. The day rhinos are gone, investors will be sitting on a goldmine."

The most effective strategy to prevent Taiwan from importing more horn, Nowell believes, is to register all existing stocks and allow them to be sold off over a period of time. Eradicating the trade will be extremely difficult.

"The reason it's so difficult to wipe out, is because the horn is so valuable," says Nowell. "In that way it is like a drug – like cocaine – not medicine. And we know how successful western countries have been at winning their drug wars."