



Survey reveals cheap rhino horn is at risk of being laundered via UK auction houses

A new survey, *Sounding the Horn*,ⁱ released today by Save the Rhino Internationalⁱⁱ has revealed that UK auction houses are selling 'antique' rhino horn items for as little as £10, leaving the UK antique trade wide open to unscrupulous individuals looking to traffic modern rhino horn, or seeking cheap, older horn for illegal use, exploiting legal loopholes and putting rhinos at risk.

Co-author and long-time supporter of Save the Rhino International, Sue Brace, says, *"This report shows that stopping the illegal rhino horn trade isn't just something that needs to happen overseas, it's a problem at home in the UK, too. Rhinos are in enough danger as it isⁱⁱⁱ, we can't allow the UK to be part of the supply chain that's driving devastating poaching numbers and causing rhino numbers to plummet.*

We're calling on UK politicians and regulators to ensure that the sale of rhino horn through the UK antique trade cannot be exploited, and to implement effective new legal controls to close the current serious, systemic loopholes once and for all."

The survey, which analysed 1,571 rhino horn antique items that were offered for sale in 2017, 2018 and 2019 through UK auction houses, highlighted grave concerns, including, but not limited to:

- A significant amount of lots sold were purchased for <£200, potentially less than the 'grind-down' value of rhino horn, making the trade vulnerable to individuals looking for a cheap supply of powdered horn
- The number of lots offered in 2019 (648) was 101% higher than the number offered in 2017 (323)
- Detailed age estimates were missing on most lots offered, making it impossible to prove that the items were pre-1947 (it is illegal to sell any rhino horn dated from post-1947). 99.9% of items offered were not radiocarbon-14 dated, 94% were listed with no detailed history, and 30% had no age estimate at all
- Five auction houses advertised lots in Mandarin, clearly catering for Chinese buyers (China, alongside Viet Nam, is a key consumer market for rhino horn), and 44 auction houses included the weight of the rhino horn within adverts, which would be important information for buyers whose primary interest was the amount of rhino horn involved
- Several strikingly similar, modern-looking lots started appearing in 2019. Some of these items have since become the subject of ongoing police investigations

Save the Rhino's CEO and co-author of the report, Cathy Dean, continues, *"As the number of lots offered for sale increase and the average price has reduced, strengthening the rules around this trade is urgent. A civil court case that has just concluded in France convicted eight men of trafficking rhino horn and elephant ivory, citing evidence that they had ground down rhino horn into powder or flakes for illegal export to East Asia. We believe it highly likely that similar crimes have been, and are being, committed in the UK."*

Save the Rhino International called on the antiques trade to do more to prevent exploitation of rhino horn, via its 2018 report on rhino horn antiques.^{iv} While the British Antique Dealers' Association stated its support for a rigorous certification scheme for rhino horn antiques, which would ensure that only items of high artistic merit dating from pre-1947 and with a value of more than US \$100 per gram would be traded, no such scheme has been implemented.



Notes:

ⁱ The full report can be found online here:

<https://media.savetherhino.org/prod/uploads/2021/09/SoundingTheHorn2017-2019.pdf>

Images for the media can be found online here: <https://we.tl/t-aZC6ZOn5we>

ⁱⁱ Save the Rhino International is a UK registered charity (no. 1035072), established in 1994, with a vision to see all five rhino species thriving in the wild.

ⁱⁱⁱ There are five rhino species (two found in Africa, three found in Asia). Three of these species (black, Sumatran and Javan rhinos) are listed as Critically Endangered by the IUCN, meaning that they are at extremely high risk of extinction in the wild. The current rhino poaching crisis began in c. 2008 and the two African species have been hardest hit. Africa lost 10,609 rhinos to poachers from 2006–20 inclusive; 8,936 of these in South Africa alone, with Kruger National Park's black and white rhino populations being the hardest hit. Global rhino populations (source: IUCN African Rhino Specialist Group, numbers as of 31 December 2017): Javan rhinos - 75; Sumatran rhinos - <80; Black rhinos - 5,366-5,267; Greater one-horned rhinos: 3,588; White rhinos - 17,214-18,917.

^{iv} The previous report analysing the UK rhino horn antiques trade in 2017, can be found online here: <https://media.savetherhino.org/prod/uploads/2018/10/SoundingtheHorn94ppOnline.pdf>