The New Zealand Herald

Environment

Opinion: Rhino horn medicine or safari auction - what's the difference?

By Fiona Gordon Monday, 20 January 2014

The auction of a permit to kill an endangered black rhino has sparked controversy. Photo / Getty Images

Opinion: The auction of a permit to hunt an African black rhino for US$350,000 threatens the credibility of anti-wildlife trafficking efforts, says Fiona Gordon.

The demand for rhino horn, lion and tiger bone and elephant ivory for use in traditional medicine, or as a show of wealth or status in certain Asian cultures, is recognised internationally as a threat to the very survival of these iconic species. The need for campaigns to reduce demand is clear. In order to be successful, campaign messengers will naturally require a certain amount of credibility and authority - a tall order when rhinos, big cats and elephants continue to be sought-after hunting trophies, an acceptable practice in other cultures.

The Obama administration sent a clear message with a July 2013 executive order establishing a presidential task force and the Federal Advisory Council on Wildlife Trafficking. On the Council's agenda, at their first meeting in December in Washington DC, was the development of a national strategy to combat wildlife trafficking, which includes numerous initiatives to reduce demand in Asia for endangered species and their body parts, in particular elephant ivory and rhino horn.

The US reinforced this with the decision to publicly crush six tons of confiscated ivory in November 2013. While reported largely as a symbolic act, the crush event arguably went further, effectively devaluing the ivory by US$10 billion - the amount the stockpile was estimated to be worth.

Opponents included Florida-based International Ivory Society co-founder Bob Weisblut, who said he thought the carvings and tusks should be sold to raise money for anti-poaching efforts. Kent University Professor of Conservation and Applied Resource Economics Douglas MacMillan made a similar comment: "Possibly a good idea if one considers that $10 billion would go a long way to funding community conservation efforts in poor source countries in Africa."

The executive order and crush event generated international media coverage, highlighting the plight of endangered species, the scale and economics of illegal wildlife trading and the commitment of the US to combat wildlife trafficking.

However, it was business as usual for the Dallas Safari Club in Texas, which held its four-day annual conference this January. With items ranging from US$200 to US$139,000, the event's extensive auction included a gold, diamond and emerald lion cuff bracelet, a lion hunt in Cameroon, a 14-day elephant hunt in Namibia and a permit to hunt a black rhino in Namibia.

Of these items, the permit to kill an endangered black rhino proved particularly controversial. "First and foremost, this is about saving the black rhino," Safari Club executive director Ben Carter said, adding that there is a "biological reason" for the hunt. "By removing counterproductive individuals from a herd, rhino populations can actually grow." According to the Safari Club, Namibia's Game Products Trust Fund will receive 100 per cent of the sale price of the hunt permit.

But Humane Society of the United States president Wayne Parcelle said while culling a herd is acceptable for an abundant population, it's not acceptable for a species on the federal endangered species list. 'We've had a standard for more than 40 years that you don't shoot an animal that's endangered," he said.

US hunters certainly spend significant amounts of money - tens of thousands of dollars a pop - for the privilege of legally hunting iconic species. However it is questionable how much of this feeds back into the pockets of local communities and sustainable wildlife management projects.

The "killing for conservation purposes" argument also wanes against various well-publicised photos of trophy hunters, such as US hunter Olivia Nalos Opre posing with her lion, which arguably depict the individual gratification of the take rather than any conservation message.

The Western tradition of hunting lion, elephant and rhino is likewise juxtaposed with the US public commitment to reduce demand for consumption of the same species in Asia. Whether you swig ground-up rhino horn or mount the rhino's entire head on a wall, both represent a show of wealth and status in different cultures. The question is which of these, if any, is more legitimate.