

A dilemma of horns

- 1 POACHING rhinos is a grisly business. Rather than attract attention with gunfire, many poachers prefer to use a tranquilliser dart to immobilise the rhino and then hack off a chunk of its face to pull out the horn. The beast usually dies of blood loss or suffocation



within hours. But the work is lucrative; booming demand in China and Vietnam has pushed the price of rhino horn over \$65,000 a kilo in some markets.

- 2 Last year 1,215 rhinos were poached in South Africa alone, up from 13 in 2007. The best way to turn the tide is to reduce demand, some conservationists reckon. In 2012 WildAid of San Francisco began campaigns to convince Chinese and Vietnamese people that consuming ground rhino horn is a cruel and ineffective way to relieve a hangover, break a fever, or heal disease; in a survey in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in 2013, 37.5% of respondents said that rhino horn can help treat cancer.
- 3 But since rhino poaching isn't slowing, horn 'unmarketing' must become more aggressive. A cunning approach has been devised by a South African firm, Rhino Rescue Project (RRP). For about \$600 per beast, RRP drills two holes into a sedated rhino's horn and pumps in a secret cocktail of toxins into its fibres. Consume powder from that horn and expect a migraine, nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, or, after a big serving, permanent twitching due to nerve damage, says RRP's co-founder Lorinda Hern. Signs warn of the dangers of illegal horn. RRP has treated more than 300 rhinos in South Africa since 2010. Since the horn is dead material, the firm says there is no danger to the animal.
- 4 A private reserve near the northern South African town of Phalaborwa paid RRP to treat about 30 rhinos. "We're trying anything," says one of the owners. Locals were invited to watch so word would spread. Poacher incursions dropped from about two a month to just four in two years, with no losses.
- 5 An American startup, Pembient, offers a different way. Next year it will begin selling synthetic rhino horn for \$7,000 a kilo. This will undercut the market for the real stuff, says CEO Matthew Markus. Others, though, fear that advertising synthetics may boost sales of real horn.
- 6 Those eager to trash rhino horn's market image face another obstacle. Many South African officials want to see a legal trade in non-poached horn, so that government stockpiles can be sold. It is perhaps telling that the South African government has not hired RRP.

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