



**Business
Opinion
Classified
TakeABreak**

Like us on Facebook
Daily Dispatch

Follow us on Twitter
@Dispatch_DD

Call us
062 578 3098



Darknet rhino trade needs high-tech solutions

Roxanne Joseph investigates how the online illegal trade of rhino horn works, and how innovative technology is being used to disrupt the market

With increased internet access, new avenues for marketing and selling endangered species and their products are being created at lightning speed. As demand grows, so too does the variety of commodities available and the techniques used to avoid detection.

Cyberspace allows for both sellers and buyers to remain anonymous, and to find things that might otherwise be difficult to find (often because they are critically endangered), all with just a few clicks.

Sellers sometimes use their real names, but will never give away their actual identity or let any details about their lives slip in casual conversation.

Although they have to start somewhere – the part of the internet that is open and accessible to anyone is the usual starting point – these types of interactions often end up on what is called the darknet.

Access to this level of the internet requires password authentication and includes platforms like Whatsapp, closed Facebook Groups and WeChat.

It is easier to remain undetected by the use of different keywords, by having a virtual private network (VPN) turned on at all times and, in many cases, a seller and buyer will never meet in person. A successful transaction relies on discretion, blind trust and middlemen.

Making payments

When it comes to payment, Western Union is a popular choice. Mostly, this is because you can make and collect payment in cash, so there is no need to worry about involving bank accounts. Senders and receivers both need to present a legitimate form of identity document, which is why some traders prefer to have someone else collect payment, like a middleman/woman. They may also already have a fake ID.

Other global payment platforms, such as PayPal, require a bank account to be linked to them, making transactions

more easily traceable, and an undesirable option for illegal wildlife trade.

Sometimes the deals are conducted in person at trade fairs, where everyone operates with cash and often deals are set up online beforehand, through group chats and forums.

This sophistication means that, at the moment, it is possible to get away with illegally trading wildlife online.

When law enforcement becomes more sophisticated, the market just goes deeper and further into the hard-to-find parts of the darknet. If this happens, there could be an increase in the use of cryptocurrency as payment for illegally traded commodities.

Tracking these trades is taking up more and more time for organisations such as the International Fund for Animal Welfare and the global wildlife trade monitoring group Traffic, which have researched online illegal wildlife markets, gathering information about advertisements found on e-commerce platforms, public forums and social media.

Their starting point is often an advertisement – for an animal as endangered as a pangolin – placed on an e-commerce platform or social media. While this request is public, the responses are not.

Their research shows that while placing an advertisement online might only seem like a small part in the bigger picture of illicit wildlife trade, it is increasingly becoming the place where actively interested communities are created.

Technical innovation

Driven by this demand, rhino poaching in South Africa – home to about 80% of the world's rhinos – has grown dra-

matically since 2008.

Since 2008 rhino poaching in South Africa has hit a critical point. Although fewer rhinos are being poached – figures released by the department of environmental affairs on July 31 showed 318 were killed in the first six months of 2019, as against 386 in the same period in 2018 – rhino numbers are declining. This is in part because of how expensive it has become to protect them – right now, a rhino is worth more dead than it is alive.

South Africa's largest private rhino breeder, John Hume, is reported to have said it costs him at least \$5m (R76m) a year to protect and take care of his nearly 1,700 white rhinos.

The controversial breeder, who is a leading supporter of the legal, international trade in rhino horn, successfully challenged the government's 2009 moratorium on the domestic trade of rhino horn in 2017. Earlier this year, he claimed bankruptcy and released a crowdfunding plea.

Turning to technical innovation to protect endangered species such as rhinos has become the leading approach by organisations like the Global Initiative against Transnational Organised Crime and Rhino Coin.

At the beginning of last year, the Global Initiative (GI) launched Digital Dangers, a project that aims to better understand and disrupt digitally-enabled wildlife trafficking.

In partnership with the Centre for Analysis of Social Media, it created an online search engine that monitors how, where and when endangered plants



DARK DAYS: Increasingly sophisticated marketing and sales methods used by illegal wildlife traders makes them difficult to track. Pictures: 123rf.com

and animals, or commodities containing them, are transacted using the internet.

This tool, the Dynamic Data Discovery Engine, searches the internet for any and all mentions of specific keywords like "ivory", "scales" and "horns", and then separates out the relevant results to create a list of URLs where users can find advertisements and conversations of what is potentially illegal activity – in other words, where people are selling and buying endangered animals, and their parts and products.

Project leader and senior researcher Simone Haysom says trying to understand the big picture is what led the GI to use technology to look at possible interventions.

"The internet confounds traditional research methods – you can't visit physical locations and use face-to-face interactions to understand illicit markets, or examine dockets and trial hearings, because there is so little enforcement of online law-breaking," she says.

Rhino Coin

Rhino Coin founder Alex Wilcocks believes that turning the focus from dead to live



rhinos is the way forward: "We need to allow the rhino to produce a profit, but right now there is a massive liability risk in keeping them alive."

When one of his family's rhinos was poached about four years ago, Wilcocks decided to create Rhino Coin, an asset-backed blockchain solution. The idea, he explains, is to separate the physical asset from its value. It has an underlying economic value on redeeming cryptocurrency for the actual representation it was issued

secure vault "somewhere deep underground".

The asset stays in the vault and participants trade its value online. An important aspect of Rhino Coin is traceability, due to it being traded via blockchain. If the global ban on rhino horn trade is lifted, the organisation "can supply the eastern market with legal horn that has not been poached" and Rhino Coin will be able to track the movement of money and of horns as they move across the globe, he says.

Online evolution

Online illegal wildlife trade is always evolving, and has shown an ability to adapt, says Caroline Cox, a senior lecturer at Portsmouth Law School.

Cox says disruption will rely, in part, on big online-based companies stepping up and taking action: "They have to put in proper interventions to see what traders are putting up. All the cards are in their hands."

● *This is part of a series finding out how online illegal wildlife trade facilitates illicit financial flow, produced with the support of the Money Trail project. The original story appeared on www.oxpeckers.org*

Keeping pet otters will kill them off

Social media users are fuelling a burgeoning appetite for acquiring wild otters and other endangered animals as pets, conservationists say, warning the trend could push species towards extinction.

Popular Instagrammers posting selfies with their pet otter may simply be seeking to warm the hearts of their sometimes hundreds of thousands of followers, but animal protection groups say the trend is posing an existential threat to the silky mammal.

All Asian otter species have long been listed as vulnerable or endangered after facing decades of shrinking habitats and illegal trade in their pelts. But conservationists say the recent surge in social media hype around the creatures has sparked such a frenzied demand for baby otters in Asian countries, Japan in particular, that it could drive entire species towards extinction.

Paul Todd of the Natural Resource Defence Council said. "It is really remarkable to see how the latest trends in social media and social influencing have a direct correlation with the demise of a species on the ground," he said.

Popular figures on Instagram and Facebook often rake in thousands of gushing comments about their otter pictures, such as "cuteness overload", "otterly adorable" and "want one!"

Nicole Duplax, who co-chairs the Otter Specialist

The reason the animal is spinning around is that it is in huge distress

Group at the International Union for Conservation of Nature, acknowledged that otters are "very charismatic creatures," saying "it is the cute factor that is causing their demise". The pictures mask the suffering of the naturally social mammals taken from the wild when they are held in captivity and isolation. Cassandra Koenen, who heads the Wildlife Not Pets campaign at World Animal Protection pointed to the numerous "funny videos" posted of pet otters turning in circles, saying that to a trained eye, it is obvious: "The reason the animal is spinning around is that it is in huge distress."

In Japan, one otter pup can fetch up to \$10,000 (R152,000).

Koenen also warned that smiling selfies with pet otters provide a "false narrative" about what it is like to live with the wild creatures, which smell and are prone to biting.

"They make very unsuitable pets," she said. – AFP

HEROES

ORDER THE CHICKEN LUNCH BOX

NOMINATE YOUR HERO AND YOU COULD WIN
A R100 KFC VOUCHER AND YOUR HERO
A R500 KFC VOUCHER

COMPLETE YOUR ENTRY FORM, ATTACH THE SLIP FROM YOUR CHICKEN LUNCH BOX, AND POST IT IN THE ENTRY BOX AT YOUR KFC

TERMS AND CONDITIONS APPLY

FOR ONLY R49.90

*Includes a copy of the Daily Dispatch valued at R6.90

INSPIRED BY LOCAL HEROES

A PROUD INITIATIVE OF DAILY DISPATCH IN PARTNERSHIP WITH JOHNSON & JOHNSON.

DailyDispatch Johnson & Johnson (Pty) Ltd