

# SMUGGLERS TRAFFICKING RHINO HORNS WITH IMPUNITY: REPORT

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Seized rhino horns are burnt by the Assam forest department on the occasion of World Rhino Day at Bokakhat near the Kaziranga National Park on September 22, 2021. | Photo Credit: The Hindu

## GUWAHATI

The seizure of rhino horns by weight has increased after 2017 despite a reduction in poaching, a global threat assessment report presented at a convention of the conservation agencies in Panama City, said.

The investigation has also led to the “prolific” Vietnamese and Chinese criminal networks driving the trafficking of the horns throughout the supply chain.

But what has alarmed the wildlife crime fighters is the audacity with which the smugglers transport the rhino horns unconcealed, indicating that the “corrupt elements” help the traffickers move the horn shipments without bothering to disguise the products.

A [comprehensive analysis](#) titled ‘Executive Summary of the Rhino Horn Trafficking as a Form of Transnational Organised Crime (2012-2021): 2022 Global Threat Assessment’, was presented at the meeting of the [Conference of Parties](#) organised by the [Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora \(CITES\)](#). The 12-day meeting will end on November 25.

Supported by the World Wide Fund for Nature, the Wildlife Justice Commission (WJC) prepared the document on the rhino horn trafficking during the decade from January 1, 2012, to December 31, 2021.

The threat assessment was compiled from the analysis of 674 rhino horn seizure incidents that had occurred globally during this decade, in addition to seven years of criminal intelligence and findings from the WJC investigations into the rhino horn trafficking, conducted since 2015.

The report said six countries and territories have dominated the rhino horn trafficking routes from the source to the destination locations although more than 50 countries and territories were implicated in the transnational crime. These countries were South Africa, Mozambique,

Malaysia, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, Vietnam, and China.

“Prolific Vietnamese and Chinese criminal networks are driving the trafficking throughout the supply chain. Although Vietnam is known to be a primary destination for rhino horn, investigations indicate a substantial proportion of the horn entering Vietnam is sold to Chinese buyers and smuggled overland into China,” the report said.

This suggests that Vietnam is a highly significant transit and distribution area for products ultimately bound for China, it said.

“More than 7.5 tonnes of rhino horns were seized globally during the decade. The average shipment weight increased markedly after 2017, despite a reduction in rhino poaching across Africa and the COVID-19 pandemic. This could indicate a greater involvement of organised crime groups as larger volumes of product are moved to increase profit margins per shipment,” the report said.

### **Smuggled unconcealed**

The analysis indicated that at least 974 kg and potentially up to one-third of all the seized rhino horns, globally originated from the theft or illegal sale of both privately-owned and government-owned legally held stockpiles. This avenue of supply may have increased since the moratorium on domestic rhino horn trade in South Africa was lifted in 2017.

“Rhino horns are most frequently smuggled on commercial airlines. However, the modus operandi is shifting from small shipments in passenger luggage to larger shipments by air cargo. This trend began prior to the pandemic and coincided with the use of more direct smuggling routes,” the report said.

“Rhino horn shipments are most often smuggled with no concealment at all, which is a notable difference from the other wildlife products and illicit commodities generally. It could suggest traffickers are more reliant on corrupt elements to move rhino horn shipments through the supply chain, making it unnecessary to disguise the products,” it added.

The investigation also led to the online trade in closed networks.

“The use of online trade, social media platforms, and instant messaging apps has increased substantially to become the most important channel through which rhino horn is distributed in the illegal trade. The use of WeChat has notably declined due to fear of law enforcement detection, with many traders switching to WhatsApp, Telegram and Signal, which are perceived to be safer,” the report said.

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