

CITES news - Czech Republic



Czech Environmental Inspectorate

Operation RHINO - case of „pseudo-hunting“ - seizure of 22 rhino horns



Photos from the press conference after realization of Operatin RHINO

September 2013:

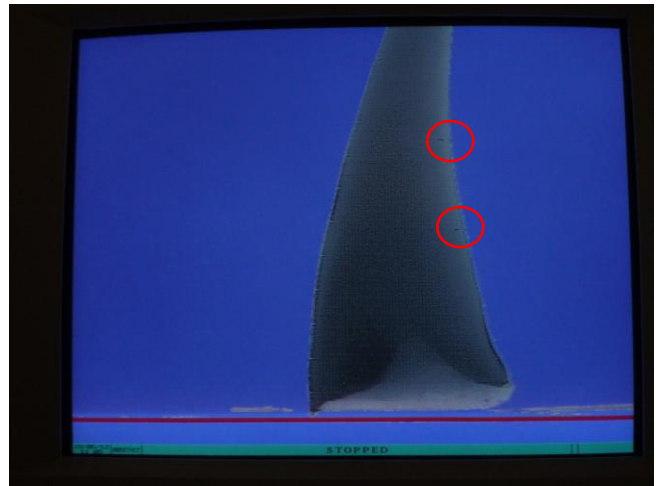
Czech authorities (Customs Administration of the Czech Republic and Czech Environmental Inspectorate) have been investigating extensive **illegal trade in white rhino horns imported to the Czech Republic from South Africa and sold probably to Vietnam**. The investigation has already taken two years and is still continuing. The case is investigating as a violation of CITES, customs fraud and criminal offence.

The target species is white rhino *Ceratotherium simum simum* which is listed in CITES App. II (App. B by EU legislation) for the purposes of trade in hunting trophies in South Africa where it is possible to apply for hunting permission within the appropriate export quota. For other rhino populations and different export purposes this type of export is classified in CITES App. I (App. A by EU legislation). By EU legislation for import of hunting trophies for personal and noncommercial purposes it is not necessary to present a CITES import permit of EU country (valid export permit of country of origin is sufficient). This exemption for trophy hunting in South Africa is widely abused by using of hired “hunters”. In combination with EU exemption for personal purposes EU country thus cannot prevent from importing suspicious rhino horns.

Organizers of this trade were connected to the Vietnamese community and recruited persons of the Czech nationality (most of them living in the same city in Northern Bohemia). These persons weren't real hunters, they didn't have a license for keeping guns, they weren't members of any hunting associations, some of them had no permanent address.... Vietnamese organizers covered their expenses (flight tickets, accommodation, hunting licenses for rhinos) within their “hunting” trips to South Africa. After the hunt these recruited hunters signed consent to give up the trophies but their names were used for the export of the horns (only horns - not the whole trophy!) from the South Africa for the alleged

purpose of "hunting trophy for personal and noncommercial use". Rhino horns were imported to the Czech Republic as private hunting trophies, but this was only a fictitious purpose, the group probably were selling those horns further to Vietnam. There is a connection to a big case investigated in South Africa too – most of the rhinos were hunted on the farm owned by Dawie Groenewald (he is under prosecution now, suspicious from illegal killing and trade with rhinos) with his profihunters and transported by his taxidermy.

During importation to the European Union this criminal group falsely declared customs value too. The fair market value of rhino horns is very high (around 50 000 USD per kg, price of a rhino hunt is around 70 000-150 000 USD), however the price per one pair of rhino horns was declared just 100 USD. The import documents were signed by the alleged signatures of Czech hunters. There was even mentioned Vietnam as a final destination in some import documents (for example in Health Certificate issued by the Department of Agriculture, Directorate Veterinary Service, Pretoria).



Photos from inspection of microchips and x-ray check (every horn had two different microchips...)

First seizure of 10 suspicious rhino horns coming from this illegal trade was realized in March 2012 at the Prague airport, after that organizers tried to realize other imports through other EU countries – 8 horns were seized at the Bratislava airport in July 2012, 4 horns were cleared at the Bratislava airport and after few months seized in Germany (in October 2012) in car driven by Vietnamese man. Due to the above mentioned circumstances regarding the possible illegal trade in rhino horns Czech authorities asked South African authorities to consult further applications for export of rhino trophies submitted by the Czech nationals.

Czech Environmental Inspectorate took samples from seized rhino horns and sent them to University of Pretoria (RHODIS database) and SASA Wildlife Forensic Unit in Great Britain for DNA analysis.



10 rhino horns seized at the Prague airport



Sampling of horns for DNA analysis

Unfortunately after some time the organizers learnt from these negative experiences and seizures of horns and have begun recruiting real hunters (with a license for keeping guns, members of hunting association...). They even established a travel agency for this purpose. Under such circumstances Czech authorities had no official reason to doubt such import of hunting trophy – there was no evidence about any illegal intention with the horns (such as for example reference to Vietnam in the documentation as in the first case). Valid export permit was issued in this third case and was submitted during the import, so there was no reason to seize the horns (also, the whole trophy was imported this time – not only horns). This third import was realized in April 2013 (through the Prague airport) and the trophy was regularly cleared through the customs. However, during subsequent inspection of the trophy done by the CEI in June 2013 only small carved items of buffalo horns were presented to CEI inspectors declared as made from the rhino horns. The rhino horns disappeared.....



Cups from buffalo horns presented as rhino



Total amount of imported rhino horns was 24 in the time..... However the investigation has been continuing and a wide net of Vietnamese organizers and their assistants living in the Czech Republic and other EU countries was uncovered little by little. During several house-searches realized by criminal authorities on July 16th 2013 sixteen persons were arrested that were involved in the trade (15 were taken into custody) – recruited hunters, organizers and their assistants, mediators.... Arrested hunters testified that they were invited to South Africa by certain people, so they did not have to pay neither for the stay, nor the rhino hunting. After the hunt they

signed consent to give up trophies and had not applied for any CITES or other document with a view to export the rhino trophies from South Africa.

Czech Environmental Inspectorate has tried to obtain information about all Czech hunters that have hunted rhinos in South Africa from 2007 till now and about all CITES export permits that were issued for Czech nationals to export rhino trophies. Unfortunately, this took some effort because South Africa doesn't have very exact records (CITES permits and hunting licences are issued by regional authorities and especially records from Limpopo province are not very accurate and definitely they are not complete). Recently we have a list of app. **50 names of Czech rhino hunters** in South Africa. In light of this information it seems very likely that the illegal trade could have started sooner than we have supposed – probably already in 2009, with peak in 2010, continuing in 2011 and further. Many of the hunters are quite suspicious and are likely to be involved in these illegal activities. There are **many issued CITES export permits for rhino trophies but these horns have never arrived to the Czech Republic nor other EU country**. We suppose that some way of transport of rhino horns from South Africa directly to Vietnam had to exist (from South Africa to Vietnam with CITES permit for export to the Czech Republic ?????). There are still many unknown circumstances....

WARNING !!! We would like to warn other EU countries that this type of illegal trade with rhino horns is likely to continue. We have information that Vietnamese groups now try to find another appropriate EU country for recruiting pseudo-hunters and import rhino horns to EU.

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