

Partnership with Swaziland on Elephant Import May Implicate US Zoos in Destructive Rhino Horn Trade

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Conservationists around the world [warned last year](#) that Swaziland's sale of elephants to US zoos would encourage other countries to sell elephants – and presumably other valuable wildlife – for profit. Still, the Dallas Zoo, Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo, and the Sedgwick County Zoo in Kansas imported 17 wild elephants in March, paying Swaziland \$450,000 under the mantle of a "conservation partnership," primarily to help rhinos. It didn't take long for the repercussions of this deal to come to light.

While the imported elephants were still settling into their zoo enclosures, Swaziland [announced a proposal](#) to permit trade in rhino horns – which many conservationists predict will escalate demand and drive rhinos to extinction. All trade in rhino horns has been illegal since 1977 because of the extreme threat to rhinos by poachers.

[According to wildlife experts](#), the open sale of stockpiled and farmed rhino horn by a few countries to consumers in Asia would accelerate the already intolerable poaching pressure on all wild populations of African and Asian rhino species. Rhino horn is made of the same substance found in hair and nails, yet it is highly valued for its use in traditional Asian medicine and as a status symbol, selling for as much as \$60,000 per kilogram – more than the price of gold. A record 1,305 rhinos were poached last year in Africa. Black rhino numbers have plummeted from 65,000 in the 1970s to less than 5,000 today, and the northern white rhino is virtually extinct, with only three individuals remaining on the planet. White rhinos are faring better, but considered near threatened due to rampant poaching.

[Swaziland's proposal](#) to the CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) Conference of Parties in September would allow the country to sell its existing stock of rhino horns to "licensed retailers in the Far East," at a profit of nearly \$10 million. The country would also farm white rhinos, regularly "harvesting" horns from living rhinos for an additional \$600,000 per year. The move came shortly after South Africa decided against offering a similar proposal, and as Kenya was preparing to burn more than a ton of rhino horns alongside 105 tons of elephant ivory to protest the decimation of Africa's wildlife.

Did zoos ignore red flags?

Behind the rhino proposal is the zoos' partner in the elephant import, Ted Reilly, who heads Big Game Parks in Swaziland, a private operation that manages three protected wildlife areas and holds all the country's elephants and rhinos. Reilly had threatened to kill elephants, which he considers a "low conservation priority," if an import permit was not issued by the US government to the zoos. He claimed an overabundance of elephants (though there were fewer than 40 before the import) was damaging the environment and competing for the forage available within fenced compounds. His higher priority objective is the rhino, which would prove extremely lucrative if trade is legalized.

Reilly had used the same threat to kill elephants when he partnered with the San Diego Zoo and Lowry Park Zoo on the sale of 11 elephants in 2003 for more than \$100,000. In fact, there has not been an elephant cull in Southern Africa for decades, but the specter of a cull in each transaction helped the zoos minimize public opposition to capturing wild elephants and breaking up families and herds.

Reilly and Big Game Parks operate freely in Swaziland, their mandate apparently unrestrained by government oversight or international wildlife trade checks. Countries that are signatories to CITES are supposed to operate separate and independent Scientific and Management authorities, yet Reilly is listed as both Scientific and Management Authority for Swaziland. In effect, Big Game Parks has applied to and given itself permission to export elephants to the US, with the zoos fully taking advantage of Reilly's position. Now, Reilly is presenting the rhino horn trade proposal as the CITES Management Authority of Swaziland, and would be the only seller of rhino horns.

All this raises the question of what the zoo partners knew about Swaziland's plan for rhinos, and whether they turned a blind eye to it in expectation of increasing zoo attendance and revenues. On the first weekend the elephants were on display at Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo, [attendance hit 23,000](#) despite cold temperatures. Prior to the import, Sedgwick County Zoo [Director Mark Reed stated](#): "It's not a question of 'if' but a question of 'when' we will have young elephant calves born here...That's going to skyrocket the attendance like nothing ever has here before." (The zoo recently announced it is naming the elephant exhibit after Reed.)

The number of elephants in US zoos is declining, and zoos are desperate to fill rapidly emptying displays. The Sedgwick County Zoo had only one elephant prior to the import; Omaha had none. Elephants do not breed well in captivity and they suffer debilitating, and often fatal, conditions as a result of captive conditions that cannot come close to replicating the natural physical and social environments to which elephants are evolutionarily adapted.

Zoos' partnership may implicate them in rhino horn trade

The zoo partners appear poised to find themselves in the middle of Swaziland's destructive rhino horn trade. The three zoos and Reilly launched a slick website in 2015 called "[Room for Rhinos](#)" to promote the Swaziland elephant import. The site states: "Wildlife experts believe the habitats currently decimated by the impact of a few dozen elephants have the potential to support hundreds of black and white rhinos ... To help accomplish this goal, the three accredited zoo partners will support Swaziland rhino conservation efforts for years to come, providing technical and financial support to aid the transition and ensure its success." The \$450,000 the zoos committed to pay Swaziland in exchange for the elephants, and to purportedly protect the country's 73 rhinos, is going into the same fund to be used for the acquisition and maintenance of the very rhinos whose horns stand to be harvested and sold, should trade be permitted by CITES.

It should come as no surprise that Swaziland intended to commercially use rhinos. The zoos' permit application to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service included documents from Big Game Parks that made it abundantly clear the commercial use of rhinos has always been on the table. Big Game Parks sets rhino policy for Swaziland and openly favors allowing rhino owners to derive economic benefits from their rhino investments, including tourism, live trade and sport trophy

hunting, regardless of the negative impact that international trade would have on other range States.

Time to take a stand for wild rhinos

Permitted sales of ivory by some countries in the past have [increased demand by consumers](#) and poaching pressure on the elephant populations of all countries, and there is no reason to believe it would be any different for rhinos. Today, some 30,000 elephants are killed each year for their tusks. More elephants are dying than are being born, threatening African elephants' very existence.

To date, no zoos have openly opposed Swaziland's disastrous rhino trade proposal, though many zoos actively oppose trade in elephant ivory. Will zoos instead tolerate the actions of Ted Reilly and Big Game Parks, hoping they will continue to supply zoos with wild elephants, and risk making active contributions to a trade that would guarantee the extinction of rhinos?

No matter how you brand it, paying for wild animals to display in zoos commercializes wildlife – and it comes with serious consequences. A “conservation partnership,” like the one between the three zoos and Swaziland, is yet another dangerous wildlife trade that puts a price on the heads of elephants, rhinos and other wildlife and threatens their very existence. It's time for it to stop.

Read more. [National Geographic's Bryan Christy writes](#) about the rhino horn trade proposal and its link to South Africa. Should Swaziland win the right to export rhino horn on the international market, South African ranchers could easily send live white rhinos to Swaziland and then harvest the horns. Both countries have a CITES exception that allows live rhinos to be exported and provides a potential loophole.

Take action. Visit [The Big Rumble on Facebook](#) for action you can take to oppose Swaziland's rhino trade proposal.

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