

June 30, 2014

## Testimonial of a rhino horn smuggler

As part of a series of ongoing investigations targeting the smuggling of rhino horns, ENV has had the opportunity to interview a number of rhino horn smugglers and their families. The following testimonial gives a “behind the scenes” look at the smuggling process, and according to the smuggler, highlights the difficulties that the government faces as it seeks to crack down on smuggling.

**Note:** ENV cannot verify the accuracy of the individual's account of events.

Mr. Trang (fictitious name) was recently caught at a major airport in Vietnam attempting to smuggle rhino horns into the country. According to Trang, he was employed as an expatriate worker in an African country and made frequent return trips to Vietnam. During his time abroad, he was approached and offered about \$2,000 per trip, in addition to the cost of his return flight home, to smuggle rhino horn. He claims to have made many such trips with rhino horn.



While Trang knew the person who hired him in the African country where he lived, he claimed not to know the identity of the receiving party in Vietnam. He stated that when he arrived in the airport, the owner always had “people” waiting at the airport to immediately receive the goods as soon as he was through Customs.

However, on a recent trip, Trang’s luck expired. Customs agents discovered some rhino horns in his luggage. Ordinarily under the law, this would be a serious problem for Trang and potentially result in criminal prosecution and imprisonment. However, according to Trang, the owner’s ‘people’ immediately intervened and worked with Customs to get Trang released. As Trang put it, “I was released so quickly with a small fine and I even got my passport back immediately”. According to Trang, the case concluded that the owner could not be identified and the rhino horns remained with Customs.

Trang named a specific agent in Customs that he claimed he worked with and helped him out of his predicament. He also stated that if other agencies got involved in a case, it became more difficult for Customs to handle the case quietly.

Trang explained that a huge sum of money was required for Customs to “change the case file”. Trang claimed that the rhino horn was then officially identified as buffalo horn and he was punished for not declaring the buffalo horn upon arrival in Customs. However, in this particular smuggling incident for which Trang was caught, Customs officials confirmed with ENV that rhino horn had been confiscated.

When the investigator inquired about Trang’s knowledge of several people that ENV has identified as major figures on the Vietnamese side of rhino horn smuggling networks, Trang was unfamiliar with the names. However, when asked about another key individual operating in an African country, who ENV believes is central to smuggling from that country, Trang knew him well, and stated that this man could fix any problems that smugglers faced on the African side of the chain.

As a result of this testimony and the testimony of other smugglers, ENV urges the central Customs Department in Vietnam to:

- implement immediate and urgent measures to limit opportunities for agents to engage in practices that may result in the unsuccessful prosecution and punishment of rhino horn smugglers
- increase transparency amongst other law enforcement agencies in cases where smugglers are caught or contraband is seized at airports, borders, and ports in order to show full accountability and promote successful seizures accordingly

ENV also urges relevant authorities to dig deeper and aggressively investigate, prosecute, and punish persons caught smuggling rhino horn. Effective enforcement combined with strict punishment of those who break the law is the only way to deter others from engaging in similar illegal activities.

Allowing Mr. Trang to walk free after attempting to smuggle rhino horns into the country does little to reduce illegal smuggling and the killing of rhinos around the world.

**Contact details:**

Wildlife Crime and Investigations Unit  
Education for Nature – Vietnam (ENV)  
Email: [envietnam@gmail.com](mailto:envietnam@gmail.com)

Investigations program advisor  
Douglas Hendrie: [dhendrie@gmail.com](mailto:dhendrie@gmail.com)

Website: [www.envietnam.org](http://www.envietnam.org)  
Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/EducationforNatureVietnam>