

# Fact Sheet: Rhino Horn Museum Heists

## Summary

In a testament to the increasingly dangerous nature of the illicit wildlife trade, museums in Belgium, the Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom have all recently suffered heists targeting rhinoceros horn, sometimes by armed robbers. These crimes have grave safety implications for collections and visitors, but the true victims are the earth's rhinos, who are being slaughtered to near extinction to fuel the demand for their horns on the black market. This fact sheet provides a timeline of the recent thefts, as well as actions taken by the international community to bring the perpetrators to justice, and hopefully prevent future offenses.

## Timeline

### 9 July 2011: Rhino Horns Stolen from Czech Castle

Thieves stole three rhino horns — hunting trophies from the late 1800s — from a Czech castle during one of its nightly tours.

*DPA Report:*

<http://www.montrealgazette.com/travel/Thieves+steal+rhino+horn+from+Czech+castle/5067546/story.html>

### 9 July 2011: Rhino Head Stolen from French Museum

Thieves stole a rhino head from the natural history museum in Blois, France. The theft was discovered on Saturday morning after a break-in. The thieves dragged the 19th century rhino head out of the museum on the floor and into a van to get away. Museum curator Jean-Louis Pointal said it was the latest in a string of rhinoceros head thefts in

recent months, and possibly linked to an international gang.

*AFP Report:*

[www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gHNxyN8--NvevZreDHDTWmq3EVw?docId=CNG.96f2bd1e98958899d20ad090a8aeefc5.941](http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gHNxyN8--NvevZreDHDTWmq3EVw?docId=CNG.96f2bd1e98958899d20ad090a8aeefc5.941)

*Art Media Agency Report:*

[www.artmediaagency.com/en/23117/stealing-rhinoceros-heads-a-new-trend-in-france-and-belgium/](http://www.artmediaagency.com/en/23117/stealing-rhinoceros-heads-a-new-trend-in-france-and-belgium/)

### **7 July 2011: Europol Links Irish Organized Crime Group to Rhino Horn Museum Heists**

The European law enforcement agency Europol publicly linked an Organized Crime Group (OCG) of Irish origin to the illicit rhino horn trade. This gang is active across Europe, as well as in South Africa, China, Australia, the United States, and throughout South America. Its members target museums, auction houses, art galleries, antique dealers, private collectors, and zoos. They are known to resort to intimidation and violence. According to Europol, the same group is also committing other serious international crimes, such as drug trafficking, distribution of counterfeit products, and money laundering. Europol has issued recommendations for EU countries and alerted potential targets of the possible threat.

*Europol Press Release:*

[www.europol.europa.eu/content/press/europol-and-ireland-identify-organised-crime-group-active-illegal-trading-rhino-horn-9](http://www.europol.europa.eu/content/press/europol-and-ireland-identify-organised-crime-group-active-illegal-trading-rhino-horn-9)

*Europol OC-SCAN Policy Brief:*

[www.europol.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/oc-scan\\_policy\\_brief\\_open\\_version.pdf](http://www.europol.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/oc-scan_policy_brief_open_version.pdf)

### **5 July 2011: Rhino Head Stolen from Museum in Belgium**

The stuffed head of a black rhino exhibited in the mammal gallery of the Brussels Natural History Museum in Belgium was stolen by three thieves at closing time. Museum guards pursued the robbers, but the thieves successfully fled to a waiting car, and escaped.

*AFP Report:*

[www.expatica.com/be/news/belgian-news/rhino-horn-robbers-strike-again-in-belgium\\_161355.html](http://www.expatica.com/be/news/belgian-news/rhino-horn-robbers-strike-again-in-belgium_161355.html)

### **16 June 2011: Police Thwart Attempted Theft of Rhino Head from Belgium Museum**

Two thieves attempted to steal a stuffed rhino head from the natural science museum in Liege, Belgium. By attacking the museum guards with tear gas, one of the suspects succeeded in tearing a horn off the head, before fleeing to a waiting vehicle. Luckily, the police quickly erected roadblocks, and captured the thieves. The pair said that they planned to leave the head at the foot of a statue in the Netherlands, where it was to be picked up in exchange for 3,000 euros.

*AFP Report:*

[www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jR2QlaagFYQvyXFLrWi70HmKi5sg?docId=CNG.7cb7d99990eea60a7a2805cbbc294dbf.e1](http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jR2QlaagFYQvyXFLrWi70HmKi5sg?docId=CNG.7cb7d99990eea60a7a2805cbbc294dbf.e1)

*AFP Report:*

[www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jasGzY01yXkAEyrz1s9gHxGlmySw?docId=CNG.400d0f07f2d2e0899ef48311491aa56c.891](http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jasGzY01yXkAEyrz1s9gHxGlmySw?docId=CNG.400d0f07f2d2e0899ef48311491aa56c.891)

### **16 June 2011: 3 Rhino Horns Stolen from La Specola Museum in Italy**

Three rhino horns were stolen from the La Specola Museum, part of the University of Florence, in Italy. The theft was discovered by museum staff and most likely took place the previous night. Police believe that the thieves hid in one of the courtyards near the museum, forced open the front door of the building, and then escaped through the back.

*The Florentine Report:*

[www.theflorentine.net/articles/article-view.asp?issuetocId=6971](http://www.theflorentine.net/articles/article-view.asp?issuetocId=6971)

*The Florence Newspaper Report:*

[www.theflorencenewspaper.com/news/florence-news/516-rhino-horns-stolen-from-city-museum-.html](http://www.theflorencenewspaper.com/news/florence-news/516-rhino-horns-stolen-from-city-museum-.html)

### **13 June 2011: Police and Others Warn Museums with Rhino Horn Collections**

Museums have been urged to remove all rhino horns from display amid fears that thieves are targeting museums in search of this valuable material.

*International Rhino Foundation Report:*

[www.rhinos-irf.org/en/art/1685/](http://www.rhinos-irf.org/en/art/1685/)

*Natural Sciences Collections Association (NatSCA) Rhino Horn Guidance for Museums:*

[natsca.info/content/rhino-horn-guidance-museums](http://natsca.info/content/rhino-horn-guidance-museums)

### **4 June 2011: Horns Stolen from Museum in Germany**

At a museum of hunting in Giffhorn, Germany, two rhino horns were stolen. The museum reported that two men aged about 40 bought entry tickets, broke off both horns, and ran away with them.

*DPA Report:*

[www.monstersandcritics.com/news/europe/news/article\\_1644605.php/Thieves-rifle-European-museums-for-rhino-horns](http://www.monstersandcritics.com/news/europe/news/article_1644605.php/Thieves-rifle-European-museums-for-rhino-horns)

### **June 2011: Rhino Horn Stolen from Museum in Germany**

A rhino horn was stolen from the Bamberg Nature Museum in Germany. It is unknown when the theft actually occurred, but it was discovered in early June, though not immediately made public. The thieves broke a glass case to remove the horn. Bamberg lets its visitors tour the exhibits unsupervised, similar to the other natural history museums that have recently been the victims of thefts.

*DPA Report (in German):*

[www.news.de/vermischtes/855188267/kostbare-nashorn-hoerner-gestohlen/1/](http://www.news.de/vermischtes/855188267/kostbare-nashorn-hoerner-gestohlen/1/)

### **June 2011: Six Horns Stolen from Museum in Germany**

In the first week of June, six rhino horns were stolen from Hamburg's Zoology Museum in Germany, included those from a rare Asian species.

*Daily Hampshire Gazette Report:*

[www.gazettenet.com/2011/06/11/rhino-horns-stolen-from-european-museums](http://www.gazettenet.com/2011/06/11/rhino-horns-stolen-from-european-museums)

### **27 May 2011: Rhino Head Stolen from Museum in England**

Burglars broke into the Educational Museum in Haslemere, Surrey, England around 2 AM and stole a mounted rhino head. They set off the alarm and fled, taking only the rhino head. The police are investigating a suspected international smuggling ring after this theft, as they believe it was a gang of professional thieves that pulled off the heist, possibly stolen to order.

*Telegraph Report:*

[www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/8546374/Police-investigating-international-smuggling-ring-after-theft-of-rhino-head.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/8546374/Police-investigating-international-smuggling-ring-after-theft-of-rhino-head.html)

### **7 May 2011: US Sentences Two Rhino Horn Smugglers to Prison**

Richard O'Brien and Michael Hegarty, two Irish citizens, pled guilty to rhino horn smuggling charges. The two men were arrested in November 2010 when they paid undercover agents USD \$17,000 for four rhino horns in Denver, Colorado. The sentence for both is six months in prison.

*Denver Post Report:*

[www.denverpost.com/news/cj\\_18013072](http://www.denverpost.com/news/cj_18013072)

### **19 April 2011: Two Rhino Horns Stolen from Museum in Portugal**

Two 18th century rhino horns were stolen from the Museum of Science, University of Coimbra, Portugal. A representative of the museum warned other museums against further thefts as the museum believes it is the work of an

international gang of thieves. The director of the museum also warned against any consumption of the horns as they may have been treated with toxic products to preserve them.

*M&H Online Report:*

[www.mandh-online.com/news/content/1566/rhino\\_head\\_theft\\_may\\_be\\_linked\\_to\\_international\\_crime\\_ring](http://www.mandh-online.com/news/content/1566/rhino_head_theft_may_be_linked_to_international_crime_ring)

### **21 February 2011: Rhino Horn Stolen from Sworder's Auctioneers in England**

The mounted head of a black rhino worth more than £50,000 was stolen from the Sworder's Auctioneers in Essex, England. Thieves forced open the doors to the auction house and took the mounted head. It is believed that the it was specifically targeted after listing the horn for sale on its website. The rhino head was the only item stolen in the raid. There was another burglary earlier in the month at the auction house that only had minor items stolen, but police officials believe that the first may have been a "reconnaissance break-in." The theft came just days after the UK instituted a total ban on the sale of antique rhino horn trophies.

*Rhino Conservation.org Report:*

[www.rhinoconservation.org/2011/02/22/following-new-trade-ban-announcement-antique-rhino-horn-trophy-stolen-from-uk-auction-house/](http://www.rhinoconservation.org/2011/02/22/following-new-trade-ban-announcement-antique-rhino-horn-trophy-stolen-from-uk-auction-house/)

### **22 July 2010: Taxidermists Warn Against 'Suspicious' Buyers Seeking Rhino Head Trophies**

Taxidermists in Denmark and Sweden have recently been approached by people wanting to acquire rhino horn for castles or museums. These people have been described as "not normal businessmen" and have no concern for CITES permits. The buyers claim that they are from Ireland or Great Britain and pose as buyers for a friend or customer who has a castle, museum, hotel, etc. where they want to build up a collection of African trophies, but the buyers appear to be primarily interested in rhino horn.

*European Taxidermy Federation Warning:*

[www.eurotaxidermy.eu/aktuelles/rhino\\_horn](http://www.eurotaxidermy.eu/aktuelles/rhino_horn)

### **17 October 2009: Stolen Rhino Bottom Jaw Found, but Horns still Missing**

In Albany, New York the bottom jaw of a stolen rhino head was found in a trash bin, but the stolen horns are still missing. The skull was taken earlier that week from the "Albany Check Casher" where the business owner Allan Gleaton had the skull, among many other hunting trophies, on display in the business front area.

*International Rhino Foundation Report:*

[www.rhinos-irf.org/en/art/765/](http://www.rhinos-irf.org/en/art/765/)

### **26 August 2009: Collection Stolen from Museum in Kenya**

58 natural and ethnographic materials --- including rhino horns --- were stolen from the Kitale Museum in Kenya. The artifacts were part of the Stoneham Collection, which was donated in 1920 and was the museum's centerpiece. The Director-General of the country's National Museum, Idle Farah, believes the stolen pieces could easily fetch \$1 million on the international antiquities market.

*Museum Security Network Report:*

[www.museum-security.org/?p=2597](http://www.museum-security.org/?p=2597)

### **June 2009: Illegal Rhino Horn Confiscated at Manchester Airport**

The UK Border Agency officials at Manchester Airport in June confiscated a rhino horn bound for China. The horn had been hidden in a fake bronze sculpture of a bird on a log made from fiberglass resin by antique dealer Donald Allison. The officials took a closer examination of the sculpture off of a tip and after discovering the horn contacted wildlife forensic scientists. The scientists were able to determine from the DNA profile taken from the horn that it matched a blood sample from an African white rhino that had lived in the Colchester Zoo before the animal had to be euthanized due to medical issues relating to his age. Bodies of protected species must be incinerated after death under government regulations, but a man from Chelmsford admitted he stole the horn before the body was destroyed. Donald Allison was sentenced to a 1 year prison sentence after pleading guilty to smuggling.

*Wildlife Extra Report:*

[www.wildlifeextra.com/go/news/rhino-horn-arrest.html#cr](http://www.wildlifeextra.com/go/news/rhino-horn-arrest.html#cr)

### **12 April 2008: Two 19th century Rhino Horns Stolen from South African Museum May Be Poisonous**

Two 19th century rhino horns were stolen from a display at the historic mammal gallery in Cape Town, South Africa. Museum officials warn that the thieves in addition to arrest and prosecution, the thieves may be exposed to poison as well. The taxidermy mounts were prepared by being soaked in arsenic and preserved from insect infestation through regular applications of DDT, which are both highly toxic. Museum officials believe the horns were deliberately targeted as they were the only items stolen from the museum. If ground up, the horns could be deadly because of the poisons. An earlier incident at the museum in February may also be linked as someone tried to smash the reinforced glass of the rhino display. That incident was just dismissed as vandalism.

*Reuters Report:*

[www.reuters.com/article/2008/04/14/us-museum-theft-odd-idUSHAR46004820080414](http://www.reuters.com/article/2008/04/14/us-museum-theft-odd-idUSHAR46004820080414)

*AP Report:*

[www.msnbc.msn.com/id/24242911/ns/world\\_news-world\\_environment/t/stuffed-rhino-back-view-minus-horn/](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/24242911/ns/world_news-world_environment/t/stuffed-rhino-back-view-minus-horn/)

### **November 2007: Cotswold Auctioneer Steals Rhino Horn from Client**

Chris Surfleet pleaded guilty to stealing a rhino horn from Christine Kulpa, a client at the Cirencester-based auction house of Moore Allen and Innocent. Surfleet was working as a senior auctioneer there in Nov. 2007 when he took

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the rhino horn. Surfleet left the company in 2009 and it was only when Mrs. Kulpa wrote to the firm asking for the horn back that the theft was exposed. Surfleet was given a six-month prison sentence and ordered to pay a fine for the theft.

*Wilts and Gloucestershire Report:*

[www.wiltsglosstandard.co.uk/news/4790435.Auctioneer\\_escapes\\_jail\\_sentence\\_after\\_admitting\\_rhino\\_horn\\_theft/](http://www.wiltsglosstandard.co.uk/news/4790435.Auctioneer_escapes_jail_sentence_after_admitting_rhino_horn_theft/)

**15 November 2002: Rhino Horn Stolen from Museum in South Africa**

A thief stole a valuable horn from a stuffed white rhino displayed at the Transvaal Museum in Pretoria, South Africa. The museum does not have security cameras, so the museum was not aware of the theft, until an employee raised the alarm. The incident came after the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) controversially agreed to let South Africa sell its ivory stocks.

*IOL Report:*

[www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/rhino-horn-worth-r150-000-stolen-from-museum-1.97294](http://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/rhino-horn-worth-r150-000-stolen-from-museum-1.97294)

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