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Rhinos Latest Victims of the Illicit Trade in Art and Wildlife

Washington, DC, 20 July 2011 — Following a recent surge in museum heists targeting rhinoceros horn, conservation and preservation organizations warn that the illegal trafficking of art and wildlife is a threat to the public, as well as the world's natural and cultural heritage.

The Lawyers' Committee for Cultural Heritage Preservation (LCCHP), the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), Save the Rhino International, and Saving Rhinos issued the following statement:

"Across Europe, thieves are targeting museums to steal antique rhino horns. These crimes obviously have grave implications for museum collections and visitors, as well as the Earth's rhinos, who are being slaughtered to near extinction to fuel the demand for their horns on the black market. These thefts speak to the value of products derived from wildlife and the lengths to which people will go to profit from their illicit trade.

Rhino horns are still a prized traditional remedy in East Asia, despite repeated scientific studies proving that they have no medicinal benefit, and recent warnings that they may actually harm human health. With a great demand for such items, they are being pilfered at an alarming rate. Just last week, law enforcement agencies linked the thefts to an Irish organized crime group, which is also involved in drug trafficking, money laundering, and the piracy of counterfeit goods.

Rhinos are an important part of our natural and cultural heritage. It is extremely vital that the international community—especially those countries where the demand for rhino horn is greatest—enforce existing laws and treaties to protect the species. Additionally, we urge the public to stop buying rhino horns, and all other illicit art and wildlife products.

The trafficking of these species will only end when the demand does—or when the supply runs out—whichever happens first. For the sake of the rhinos, and all of us, we hope that it will not be the latter."

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Rhinos Latest Victims of the Illicit Trade in Art and Wildlife — 2

In past months, institutions in Belgium, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal, and the United Kingdom have all suffered thefts, sometimes by armed robbers. Last week, law enforcement agencies linked an Irish organized criminal group to the raids, and cautioned that the gang may strike again. "This is not Hollywood, where museum heists are glamorous, and even harmless. These crimes threaten a species with extinction and endanger the public. We are all victims," said Tess Davis, Executive Director of the Lawyers' Committee for Cultural Heritage Preservation.

Until the perpetrators are apprehended, the police are advising museums to remove all rhino horns from display. Such an unprecedented advisory demonstrates the severity of the risk, even far away in the United States. "We're very concerned about these thieves operating in the U.S. — first and foremost because it shows the tremendous demand that exists for wildlife products such as rhino horn and elephant ivory — and also because we frequently display public exhibitions of wildlife trade as an educational tool. These exhibits could conceivably become targets for the thieves," said Kelvin Alie, Director of IFAW's Prevention in Illegal Wildlife Trade Program.

Indeed, the criminals know no borders, as the robberies of museums in Europe are closely connected to the slaughter of rhinos in Asia and Africa. "In the last three years, 800 African rhinos have been killed and experts agree that we are facing the worst rhino poaching crisis in decades," said Lucy Boddam-Whetham, Acting Director of Save the Rhino International. According to Rhishja Larson, Founder of Saving Rhinos, "In South Africa alone, nearly 200 rhinos were killed between January and July of this year. Comparatively, 125 rhinos were killed during the same time period in 2010."

With the number of rhinos in the wild plummeting, the illicit trade is hunting horns elsewhere. The European Taxidermy Foundation (ETF) has alerted its members that smugglers posing as collectors are attempting to buy horns. Antique horns from old "trophy" collections have also sold for record prices at auction, presumably for use in pseudo-medicine, which prompted the U.K. to completely ban their export. And as recent events demonstrate, traffickers have now turned to theft from private and public collections, where rhino horns have long been treasured for their artistic, historical, and scientific value.

For additional information, photographs, or fact sheets, contact:

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The Lawyers' Committee for Cultural Heritage Preservation

LCCHP fosters the stewardship of the objects, places, and traditions that define us as societies, nations, civilizations, and even human beings. We are lawyers, legal scholars, and law enforcement agents — in addition to anthropologists, archaeologists, architects, art historians, students, and others — who champion preservation through the justice system. We also work to ready a new generation of advocates, as well as to educate the general public. To learn more, visit www.culturalheritagelaw.org. Follow us on [Facebook](#).

Rhinos Latest Victims of the Illicit Trade in Art and Wildlife — 3

The International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW)

Founded in 1969, IFAW saves animals in crisis around the world. With projects in more than 40 countries, IFAW rescues individual animals, works to prevent cruelty to animals, and advocates for the protection of wildlife and habitats. For more information, visit www.ifaw.org. Follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

Save the Rhino International

Save the Rhino International works to conserve viable populations of critically endangered rhinos in Africa and Asia. We recognize that the future of wildlife is inextricably linked to the communities that share its habitat. By funding field projects and through education, our goal is to deliver material, long-lasting and widespread benefits to rhinos and other endangered species, ecosystems and to the people living in these areas. To learn more, visit www.savetherhino.org.

Saving Rhinos

Saving Rhinos produces and publishes public awareness content about the illegal trade in rhino horn and works behind the scenes to provide research and subject matter expertise to investigative agencies and the media. To learn more, visit www.savingrhinos.org.

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