

Establishment of the South Asia Wildlife Trade Initiative (SAWTI) for Combating Illegal Trade in Wildlife and Strengthening Enforcement of CITES in the Region

At the 10th Meeting of the Governing Council of the SACEP on 25th January 2007, the Environment Ministers of the eight countries in the South Asia region expressed serious concerns at the growing threat of poaching and illegal trade of wild species of flora and fauna, which is seriously impeding biodiversity conservation efforts by all countries. The Governing Council decided that SACEP should incorporate a work programme for combating illegal trade in wildlife and its products, and strengthen enforcement of CITES in the region (see GC10 SACEP report, Section 9.3).

In order to take this important decision of the Governing Council forward, on 20th July 2007, SACEP entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring network and a joint programme of IUCN and WWF. Under the MOU, both parties agreed to develop a South Asia Wildlife Trade Initiative (SAWTI); develop and implement a South Asia Regional Strategy for combating illegal trade in wild flora and fauna and to ensure that wildlife trade is maintained at sustainable levels in South Asia; establishment of a South Asia Wildlife Enforcement Network; and hold consultations on these topics.

The First Regional Workshop on the South Asia Wildlife Trade Initiative was held in Kathmandu, Nepal, from 31st January - 1st February 2008. Organized by the Nepal Ministry of Environment, Science and Technology; SACEP; WWF Nepal; and TRAFFIC, the aims of the workshop were to follow-up on the earlier 2004 Kathmandu Wildlife Trade Workshop and the SACEP Governing Council's decision for development of a work programme for combating illegal trade in wildlife and its products and strengthen enforcement of CITES in the region.

The workshop included participants from all eight South Asian countries - Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. In addition, participants included representatives from the CITES Secretariat, ASEAN-WEN Programme Coordination Unit, TRAFFIC, IUCN and WWF. Observers were also invited from relevant inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations, as well as foreign governments. The Workshop was made possible with funding from the US Department of State, SACEP and WWF.

The Workshop participants agreed to a series of joint actions as part of a South Asia Wildlife Trade Initiative, including the establishment of a South Asia Experts Group on Wildlife Trade and the development of a South Asia Regional Strategic Plan on Wildlife Trade (2008-2013). They also called upon the international community to support action in South Asia by providing financial and technical assistance in the implementation of the regional plan.

A draft of a South Asia Regional Strategic Plan on Wildlife Trade was agreed to at the meeting, focusing on a number of key areas of work. These include co-operation and co-ordination (including discussion on the establishment of a South Asia Wildlife Enforcement Network); effective legislation, policies and law enforcement; sharing knowledge and effective dissemination of information; sustainability of legal trade and livelihoods security; intelligence networks and early warning systems; and capacity building.

Regional co-operation can provide the best solution for regional problems and SAWTI is the first wildlife trade initiative of its kind in South Asia. The agreement reached on SAWTI puts in place the foundations for a co-operative effort to crack down on illegal trade and to improve the management of wild species that can be legally traded under national laws in the region. SAWTI will lead to further commitment in the region, and closer engagement among neighbours to effectively address wildlife trade problems.

However, the success of this regional initiative depends greatly upon strong political commitment at the national level. Participants at the workshop are therefore requesting Ministers constituting the Eleventh Meeting of the Governing Council to give their full support, in the form of a Ministerial Statement (Annex 1), to the South Asia Wildlife Trade Initiative and Regional Strategic Plan (Annex 2) endorsed at the workshop.

It is hoped that the Governing Council will call for the rapid establishment of a South Asia Experts Group on Wildlife Trade, consisting of relevant technical representatives from the eight member countries, which would meet periodically to provide a forum for the development of regional programmes through networking, sharing and effective dissemination of knowledge and information.

It is also hoped that the Governing Council will instruct the Experts Group above to develop a detailed work programme for implementing the South Asia Regional Strategic Plan on Wildlife Trade, with the assistance of the SACEP Secretariat, TRAFFIC and other relevant partners.

The Governing Council is also requested to urge other countries, donors and organizations to provide financial and technical support to assist in the implementation of this work programme.

**The 11th Meeting of the Governing Council of SACEP
Statement on South Asia Wildlife Trade Initiative (SAWTI)**

Aware that the countries in the South Asia region are very rich in terrestrial and marine natural resources which are storehouse of unique biodiversity as well as many endangered species and that there is rapid growing demand both locally and globally for wildlife products.

Acknowledging that while legal trade can be monitored and managed, illegal trade in wild animals and plants poses a major challenge to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in South Asia.

Recalling that all the countries in the region are presently having various laws and regulations to regulate wildlife trade and to prevent illegal trade but still are subject to large scale illegal trade in wildlife and its derivatives by a well organized local and international illegal trade network.

As recognized by the Sovereign states, the legal harvesting and trade in wild species is an important and sustainable source of livelihood and income to many rural communities and that adequate protection, sustainable harvest and wise use of wild animals and plants can play vital role in conservation of species and their habitats as well as in lifting people out of poverty and securing their future.

Realizing that despite concerns of overexploitation of wildlife by the civil society and efforts of the enforcement agencies it is unlikely that the on going trend of increased illegal trade by the strong international illegal wildlife crime nexus can be tackled without new enforcement strategies and through regional cooperation and networking.

Recognizing that seven of the countries in the region have committed for wildlife conservation and to regulate trade under the convention on International Trade in Endanger Species (CITES) of flora and fauna through its various resolutions.

Recalling the South Asia Wildlife Trade Diagnostic Workshop held in Kathmandu in April 2004, and the priorities identified for improved regional cooperation to address wildlife trade challenges in South Asia.

Recalling the decision taken in the tenth governing council meeting of SACEP on 25th January 2007 to incorporate a work programme (2007-2008) for combating illegal trade in wildlife products and to help strengthening of enforcement of CITES in the region.

Aware of CITES Resolution 11.3 'Compliance and Enforcement' revised at the 14th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to CITES in July 2007 urging parties to consider formulating regional action plans, incorporating timetables, targets and provisions for funding, designed to enhance enforcement of CITES, achieve compliance with its provisions, and support wildlife-law enforcement agencies;

Acknowledging the memorandum of understanding signed by SACEP and TRAFFIC International on 20/07/07 to jointly take the initiative of regional

cooperation, for combating illegal trade and maintenance of sustainable level in legal trade, forward and joint efforts initiated by them.

Recalling the endorsement of the South Asia Regional Strategic Plan on Wildlife Trade (2008-2013) by the senior officers of the member countries at the first regional workshop on the South Asia Wildlife Trade Initiative in Kathmandu from 31st January and 1st February 2008.

Stressing the importance of mutual networking and technical support as well as financial and technical support from the international community for building expertise, resources, and capacity to address the needs of the region for combating the illegal wildlife trade; and

Believing that regional cooperation can provide the best solution for regional problems;

We the Environment Ministers constituting the 11th meeting of the Governing Council of SACEP,

Support the South Asia Wildlife Trade Initiative and regional action plan;

Urge to establish the South Asia Experts Group on Wildlife Trade, consisting of relevant technical representatives from the eight member countries, which would meet periodically to provide a forum for the development of regional programmes through networking, sharing and effective dissemination of knowledge and information;

Mandate the expert group to develop a detailed work programme for implementing the South Asia Regional Strategic Plan on Wildlife Trade with the assistance of SACEP, TRAFFIC and other relevant partners; and

Request Countries, donors and other organizations to provide financial and technical support to assist in the implementation of this work programme.

South Asia Regional Strategic Plan on Wildlife Trade (2008-2013)

The Context

South Asia region covers an area of approximately 42,916,000 km². Comprising of **Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka**, the region has over 15% of the world's flora and 12% of its fauna (UNEP, 2001). It encompasses 16 of the 238 globally important eco-regions (WWF Global 2000), notably the Terai-Duar Savannah and Grassland eco-region across Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal, the Sundarbans Mangroves of Bangladesh and India, Indus River Delta of India and Pakistan, the Andaman Sea and the Maldives and Lakshadweep Atolls. These eco-regions support exceptionally rich biodiversity and a huge array of unique, threatened and endangered species (e.g. the Asiatic lion, tiger, snow leopard, Asian elephant, one-horned rhinoceros, and eight of the world's 15 crane species). Within South Asia, India and Nepal together contribute nearly 10% of the global biodiversity while occupying merely 2.5% of the global land area.

Because of this richness in biodiversity, South Asia has been one of the prime targets of international organized wildlife crime networks taking advantage of poverty-related conflicts and instigating people to commit wildlife crimes for the ultimate benefit of rich international consumers. During the past two decades, there has been a sudden increase in the demand for wild animal and plants from South Asia. Seizures in many countries of the region, of parts and derivatives from wildlife - including **tiger, leopard, elephant, ornamental fish, birds**, and rare **medicinal plants** - are a pointer to the fact that rare and endangered fauna and flora of the region are in great demand locally as well as globally leading to unsustainable harvest and trade. The trade is diverse, ranging from live animals and plants to a vast array of wildlife products derived from them, including **food, medicines, trophies, skin and hide, exotic leather goods, wooden musical instruments, timber and tourist curios**.

While legal trade can be monitored and managed, illegal trade in wild animals and plants poses a major challenge to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in South Asia. Although confirmed statistics are unavailable, yet analysts believe that the quantum of illegal trade in wildlife and their parts and products is second to narcotic trade. Investigations have also revealed that illegal hunting and trade is accomplished through a deep-rooted and well-established clandestine chain of operators who have developed strong nexus with international wildlife crime network. Despite concerns from the conservation community, enforcement agencies and civil society about the overexploitation and resultant decline in wildlife, it is unlikely that the ongoing trend will be stopped unless existing conservation measures and enforcement strategies are reinforced through regional cooperation.

Besides illegal trade, the legal harvesting and trade in wild species is an important and sustainable source of income to many rural communities in South Asia. Experience gained in the region indicates that adequate protection, sustainable harvest and wise use of wild animals and plants can play vital role in conservation of species and their habitats as well as in lifting people out of poverty and securing their future. It is, therefore, important that the use of natural biological resources is brought

within sustainable limits to maintain biodiversity's "*potential to meet the needs and aspirations of present and future generations*". The concept of sustainability can also lead to "*incentive-driven conservation*" where wise use of a resource can create positive incentives to conserve biological resources

Controlling the illegal trade and managing legal harvest at sustainable levels will not only help in ensuring livelihoods security to the ecosystem dependant communities but will also pave the way for biodiversity conservation. Most of the countries in South Asia are parties to international conventions concerned with the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. These instruments echo joint commitment by international organizations, national governments, non governmental organizations and the civil society. Concerted efforts are now urgently needed by all South Asian countries to fulfil their international obligations through effective enforcement, greater political commitment, improved intelligence sharing, sustainable harvest and trade mechanism and strengthen capacity of the agencies engaged in managing wildlife.

Rationale

The wildlife trade and its impact is an important challenge to achieving CITES and CBD objectives particularly for those species which are on the verge of extinction due to overexploitation for human consumption. With rapid transformation in the consumption pattern and globalization of economy, it is physically impossible for any country to prevent wildlife exploitation irrespective of the quality of legislation, conservation management and enforcement. Such measures are unlikely to succeed unless supported by local communities, producer and consumer countries. Cooperation and coordination from local to global level is, therefore, essential to manage the ongoing wildlife trade in South Asia.

Experience gained during the past forty years shows that the trade in wildlife has grown disproportionately high and is currently expected to be worth billions of dollars involving thousands of animal and plant species. A significant proportion of this trade is illegal and the quantum is growing as new laws and policies are made and old laws are amended to prevent or regulate it. The organized networks of wildlife criminals have developed innovative mechanisms to continue their clandestine operation. It is, therefore, necessary that suitable changes in the national and international legal framework are made from time to time to counter the evolving strategies of organized criminal network.

Growing poverty and deprivation in and around the natural ecosystems enhances the dependence of inhabitants on the forest resources and international instruments, national laws, policies or regulations matter little to them as they struggle everyday for survival. Their livelihood strategies are precarious and vary from region to region but are mostly exploitative in nature with low opportunity costs and financial returns. Countries in South Asia generally recognize the need for sustainable livelihoods for forest dwellers and have initiated far reaching policy and institutional reforms adopting participatory approaches. At the same time there is an urgent need to support the ongoing poverty alleviation and sustainable development efforts with experiences and success stories in other parts of the world.

In April 2004, TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring and a joint programme of IUCN and WWF that works in close cooperation with CITES Secretariat, brought together 70 representatives from government departments, law enforcement and non-governmental organisations from South Asia (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) and key neighbouring countries of China and Myanmar. The participants appreciated each other's concerns, needs and constraints and agreed to find ways that the region can move forward through collaborative efforts towards a common set of goals. The key areas that emerged from the workshop were **co-ordination, co-operation and communication** between countries in South Asia and the region's neighbours. It was agreed that efforts were required for fostering broader awareness on the issues and implications of wildlife trade across countries, sharing information on common problems and developing response strategies. Explicit attention was needed for building capacity of enforcement staff, sharing information and experiences on mechanisms for setting in place enabling frameworks for conservation of species in trade in order to support sustainable development and poverty alleviation goals. In this context, it is important to highlight that member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) adopted an ASEAN Regional Action Plan on Trade in Wild Fauna and Flora (2005-2010) at the special meeting of the ASEAN experts group on CITES on May 3, 2005 in Jakarta. The plan aims to promote regional cooperation and networking amongst the enforcement authorities to curb illegal trade in wildlife. Subsequently, a special meeting of the ASEAN Ministers responsible for the implementation of CITES was held in Bangkok on 1 December 2005. The Ministers decided to launch the ASEAN Wildlife Enforcement Network (ASEAN-WEN) with the support and participation of CITES Authorities, Customs, Police, Prosecutors, Specialized Governmental Wildlife Law Enforcement Organizations and other relevant national law enforcement agencies. Considering the growing threat of poaching and illegal trade to wild species, and the ever growing demand for wildlife products, both flora and fauna, for medicinal and cosmetic use. It has now become imperative to formalize a South Asian Wildlife Trade Initiative (SAWTI) for South Asia.

The Minister of State for Environment and Forests, Government of India, during his inaugural address at the 10th Governing Council of SACEP on 25th January, 2007 drew the attention of member countries on the need for strengthening the CITES regulations for combating illegal trade in wildlife and its products. He also highlighted the need for addressing common environmental concerns and problems through cooperative efforts. The Ministers of the eight member countries agreed that SACEP should incorporate specific work programme to achieve this objective in the region. It is in this context that a long term strategy is proposed for regional cooperation in regulating trans-boundary wildlife trade and for managing the legal trade effectively and efficiently.

The Strategy

The South Asian regional strategy is an attempt to respond to two major challenges facing trade in wild species today. The **first** is to develop practical ways to support governments, non government organizations and individuals and civil society in ensuring the effective implementation of national laws, policies and programmes that leverage real and meaningful change in combating illegal trade. The **second** is to

strengthen the relationship between conservation and poverty reduction in such a way that wildlife consumption is maintained at sustainable levels. These two challenges are inextricably linked and will be pursued through a leverage programme built upon extensive experience in some of the countries of the region.

The strategy will be based on **SIX** programme elements which will be addressed in an integrated manner and appropriate interventions as and when required to ensure that these are not treated as stand alone issues. For this purpose, full and unhindered support of the national governments, Inter-Governmental Organizations, NGO's and civil society will be crucial. The programme elements mentioned below are not in order of priority for the reason that these will operate within the context of national priorities and the harmonized approaches between and among the stakeholders in each country.

- 1. Cooperation and Coordination***
- 2. Effective laws and policies***
- 3. Sharing knowledge and effective dissemination***
- 4. Species Conservation, Sustainable trade and livelihoods security.***
- 5. Risk assessment and early warning***
- 6. Capacity building***

Purpose and scope

1. To assist South Asian countries in combating and eventually eliminating illegal trade in wildlife.
2. To assist and support South Asian countries in achieving strategic goals as outlined in CITES Strategic Vision 2008-2013.
3. To support South Asian countries in managing the legal trade at sustainable levels.

Programme Element 1: Cooperation and Coordination

Goal 1.1 – Situation analysis in which the South Asia Wildlife Trade Initiative (SAWTI) will operate in the region.

Objective 1.1.1 - Support South Asian countries in achieving the relevant programme objectives of the CITES Strategic Vision 2008-2013

Objective 1.1.2 – Under this the countries discussed the establishment of a South Asia Wildlife Enforcement Strategy supported by the CITES Secretariat.

Programme Element 2: Effective laws policies, and enforcement

Goal 2.1 – Improved law enforcement and protection at local, national and regional level.

Objective 2.1.1 - Review national laws and policies and their impact on species harvest and trade

Objective 2.1.2 - Support harmonization of laws at national level and their consistency with CITES, CBD and other relevant multi-lateral environmental agreements

Objective 2.1.3 - Assess the feasibility of mutual legal and administrative assistance among SA countries

Objective 2.1.4 - Promote law enforcement and provide techno-legal support

Programme Element 3: Sharing knowledge and effective dissemination

Goal 3.1 – To increase information exchange, communication, public education, participation, and awareness

Objective 3.1.1 - Improved information exchange, understanding and support for combating illegal trade and sustaining legal trade

Goal 3.1.2 – To implement the active knowledge management and trade action learning concept between the parties and partners to this Strategy

Programme Element 4: Species Conservation, Sustainable trade and livelihoods security

Goal 4.1 – Protect species affected by trade, now or in future and promote sustainable harvest

Objective 4.1.1 - Develop sustainable harvest models to enhance species conservation

Goal 4.2 – Improved understanding of species trade dynamics

Objective 4.2.1 - Develop and support focussed research programme to improve understanding of markets, trade mechanisms, routes, economics and motivation

Objective 4.2.2 - Enhance technical capacity at the national levels to accurately assess and monitor trade and species status

Objective 4.2.3 - Encourage approaches for management decisions to be based on sound knowledge and precaution

Goal 4.3 – Address livelihoods issue in a pragmatic manner.

Objective 4.3.1 Build capacity of local communities to develop and implement adaptive community management systems sustainable harvest and use of species in trade

Objective 4.3.2 - Support the development of country specific and realistic projects to address trade related livelihoods issues

Objective 4.3.3 - Facilitate funding support for implementation of rehabilitation programme

Objective 4.3.4 - Strengthen the linkage between livelihoods strategy and wildlife trade regulations

Programme Element 5: Risk assessment and early warning

Goal 5.1– Streamline intelligence network and developing proactive approaches for advance warning

Objective 5.1.1 - Harmonize data collection and streamline reporting process

Objective 5.1.2 – Establish early-warning mechanisms to enable proactive approaches

Programme Element 6: Capacity building

Goal 6.1 – Enhance the capability of enforcement agencies

Objective 6.1.1 - Develop new tools to assist enforcement agencies

Objective 6.1.2 – Strengthen the capacity of enforcement authorities

Goal 6.2 – Enhanced country capability to maintain trade at sustainable levels

Objective 6.2.1 – Strengthen the capacity for scientific authorities to conduct Non-detriment Findings and the capacity for management authorities to manage trade at sustainable levels, and improve coordination between and among them