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# Pangolins, Elephants, Crime Syndicates on CITES' Radar

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**JOHANNESBURG, South Africa**, September 19, 2016 (ENS) – Illegal trade in endangered species, including internet commerce, is enormous – by any estimate. Far-reaching decisions on managing the world's wildlife are about to be made here in Johannesburg, where 182 countries plus the European Union will gather Saturday at the Sandton Convention Centre for 12 days of intense negotiations.

Johannesburg will host the triennial conference of countries are Parties to the world's most important wildlife treaty – the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora, usually called CITES (pronounced sigh-tees).

The 17th Conference of the Parties to CITES, CoP17, is the first hosted by an African country since 2000. About 2,500 participants and 250 accredited media will attend.

Elephants, lions, tigers and rhinos, and in the oceans sharks and rays, are well-known endangered wildlife species, and conservation measures for them all will be considered by CITES delegates. But, CITES is not just about well-known animals.

The CITES treaty makes rules for cross-border trade in over 35,000 wild species of plants and animals. CoP17 delegates will accept or reject 62 species specific proposals submitted by 64 countries.

Dr. Teresa Telecky, director, Wildlife Department, Humane Society International, is positive about many of the CoP17 species proposals.

"I have been doing this for 26 years and this is a meeting with a great many uplisting proposals," she explained, describing "uplisting" proposals that make trade in endangered species more difficult.

Dr. Telecky is pleased that numerous proposals affect "species that are unfamiliar to many," such as pangolins, nautilus, pygmy chameleons, geckos, turtles, and 15 species of rosewood.

**Trade in African Elephant Ivory Again Proposed**

Three proposals concerning the African elephant, *Loxodonta africana*, are already generating hot debate, as an existing global embargo on ivory sales is due to end in 2017.

The first two proposals involve Namibia and Zimbabwe. Led by Rowan Martin, Zimbabwe's representative to CITES, these countries want CoP17 delegates to lift CITES trade controls on African elephant ivory.

Numerous countries oppose this approach. Both the CITES Secretariat and the nonprofit wildlife monitoring network TRAFFIC and have recommended that the Parties reject all three proposals.



**Elephant family in Botswana's Chobe National Park, Jan. 22, 2012 (Photo by Gregory Naud)**

The third African elephant proposal is brought by: Benin, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Chad, Ethiopia, Kenya, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sri Lanka and Uganda. This proposal bans all African elephant trade. However, CITES procedures give Parties the ability to "opt out" of the changes proposed.

The result, TRAFFIC believes, "would be counterproductive for elephant conservation and could place African elephants at greater risk."

While many countries oppose opening the elephant ivory trade, the European Union is still on the fence, a position that is causing alarm in the 29 African countries of the African Elephant Coalition.

In a position paper, the EU said, "Given the continuous high levels of elephant poaching and illegal ivory trade, it is premature to agree on a resumption of trade. The efforts by Namibia for wildlife conservation and to combat poaching and illegal trade should nonetheless be recognised and further encouraged."

"The situation is alarming in most of our countries," says Azizou El Hadj Issa, former minister of agriculture in Benin and president of the Council of Elders of the African Elephant Coalition.

"Elephants are slaughtered every day, rangers are being killed and the trade is fueling terrorism which destabilizes the continent and has huge repercussions for EU security," Issa warned at a meeting with EU officials in July. "We need the EU to support us and become part of the solution to this crisis. We, the Africans, have that solution and we call on the EU and its member States to throw their support behind our proposals."

**Pangolins Protected But Disappearing**

Despite legal protections, pangolins (say pang-guh-linz) are the most illegally traded mammals in the world. Native to Asia and Africa, these mammals hunt at night for ants and roll up into a ball when threatened.

Gaining popular recognition as the basis for the Pokémon Sandslash, all eight species of pangolins are threatened with extinction.



**This African species of pangolin, *Manis temminckii*, is listed as Vulnerable to extinction on the IUCN's Red List. (Photo by Maria Diekmann of Rare and Endangered Species Trust courtesy U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service)**

The four Asian species are listed as Critically Endangered or Endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, IUCN, on its Red List of Threatened Species.

Pangolins are vanishing due illegal trade and the destruction of their habitat. People illegally hunt pangolins for their meat, their scales, used in traditional medicine, and their skins which become luxury fashion accessories.

The Endangered Indian pangolin, *Manis crassicaudata*, for instance, can adapt to modified habitats, but a large proportion of its range has high human population density. The pangolins are experiencing rapid loss and deterioration of habitat, according to the Zoological Society of India, which reported to the IUCN Red List in 2002 that an increase in the agrarian economy, improved irrigation and the use of pesticides are additional threats to this species.

Even though CITES already regulates all species of pangolin, the IUCN Pangolin Specialist Group estimates that pangolins are "the most illegally traded wild animals on the planet."

All eight pangolin species are listed under Appendix II of CITES, so trade is regulated and monitored and permits are required from exporting countries. To issue a permit, the exporting country must determine that this activity will have no detriment to the wild population.

As an added protection for the four Asian species, CITES imposed a zero export quota. Still, scientific and research uses can still be authorized by permit. For the four African species, commercial trade is not prohibited, but permits are still required.

Pangolins also are protected in their range states by domestic wildlife laws.

The delegates at CoP17 will consider five pangolin proposals, submitted by 19 countries, including the United States. If accepted, the proposals would ban all international trade in pangolins or their parts.

Again, the CITES Secretariat and TRAFFIC are in agreement — accept all five proposals.

**Vulnerable Sharks and Rays**

Delegates to CoP17 will receive updates on actions taken to protect sharks and rays following the last meeting of the Parties, CoP16 in Bangkok.

There, five shark species – the oceanic white tip, porbeagle and three species of hammerhead – and all manta rays were given protection under CITES Appendix II, with trade in these species allowed but regulated to prevent over-exploitation.

CITES Secretary-General John Scanlon said, "At CITES CoP16 in 2013, countries turned to CITES to assist in protecting precious marine resources from overexploitation through including five new shark species and all manta rays under CITES trade controls.

"Since then, CITES, in close collaboration with the UN Food and Agriculture Organization and other partners, has demonstrated the added value of CITES in protecting sharks and rays from overexploitation. This year, at CITES #CoP17, countries are again being presented with new listing proposals for sharks and rays, which they will consider and decide upon, informed by the best available science."

In Johannesburg, CoP17 Parties will be asked to consider three more proposals to bring sharks and rays under CITES Appendix II trade controls, to include: the Silky shark, *Carcharhinus falciformis*; Thresher sharks, and Devil rays.

**Crime Syndicates Never Sleep**

"It is now well recognized that transnational organized crime groups are deeply involved in wildlife crime and are driving the industrial scale illicit trafficking that we are confronting," says Secretary-General Scanlon.

How much is the illegal wildlife trade worth?

Dr. Richard Thomas, TRAFFIC Global Communications Coordinator, believes that valuing such trade is counterproductive.

"Messaging that emphasizes the supposed high value of wildlife products on the black market risks attracting the attention of the very criminal elements the world is seeking to deter," he told ENS.

But CITES is fighting back by forming a powerful partnership. In 2010, ICCWC, (say ick-wic) was formed. The abbreviation stands for International Consortium on Combatting Wildlife Crime. It is a collaboration among CITES, the International police force INTERPOL, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the World Bank, and the World Customs Organization.

At CoP17, ICCWC will report to the delegates on its activities. "Threats posed by serious wildlife crime can only be effectively addressed through increased collaboration and collective efforts across range, transit and destination States," the partnership said in a statement. "ICCWC has now come of age and is delivering … front-line support to States."

This alliance was formally established on November 23, 2010 in St. Petersburg, Russia during the International Tiger Forum when the signatures of all partners were included on a Letter of Understanding.

The aim of ICCWC is to usher in a new era where perpetrators of serious wildlife and forest crime will face a formidable and coordinated response, rather than the present situation where the risk of detection and punishment is all too low.

Satyen Sinha, director of strategy at Bumblebee Connect, an international knowledge startup for environmental and social problems based in Manchester, UK, believes that "the ICCWC Toolkit is one of the most important tools." Available since 2012, the Toolkit helps struggling governments manage this wildlife war on the ground.

Sinha, formerly with the International Fund for Animal Welfare, would like to see accomplishments at this CITES conference that include: 1) approval of the pangolin proposals, 2) rejection of the Swaziland white rhino proposal, 3) stronger protections for lions, and 4) rejection of the EU bloc voting proposal."

The EU's bloc vote can be a problem for wildlife.

The logic behind the EU vote is that by having all 27 member states adopt a common position over a proposal, the bloc vote can increase Europe's influence at the CITES conference.

A two-thirds majority is needed for proposals within CITES to pass, so the EU's 27 votes make up a big chunk of the vote. Sometimes, it's enough to determine the fate of a proposal, such as CITES 2013 rejection of a ban on polar bear hunting due to the opposition of Denmark, arguing for the right of its satellite state Greenland to hunt the bears. All EU countries abstained, except Denmark which voted against the proposal. The hunt continues.

**So, How Does CITES Work?**

CITES regulates international trade in selected species with a licensing system — import and export permits. Each Party must designate a Management Authority and a Scientific Authority. For the United States, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service fills both roles. The Scientific Authority "advises on the effects of trade on the status of the species" and the Management Authority issues permits.

Delegates of the 182 Parties vote to include species on one of three lists — Appendix I, II, or III – that divide the species "according to the degree of protection they need."

Commercial trade Appendix I listed species is banned. Trade in species listed on Appendix II or III is legal as long as CITES procedures and domestic laws are followed.

As Scanlon prepares for CoP17 in Johannesburg, he knows that this meeting is critically important. The Parties, he said, "…will address some very difficult and contentious issues to do with divergent approaches amongst CITES Parties on matters affecting trade in certain high profile CITES listed species, where the role, scope and future direction of the Convention will be debated and decided upon."

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