

Nations meet to protect wildlife

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Elephants and the ivory trade come under the spotlight as the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) summit opens.

Just prior to the opening, a committee voted that a limited sale of stockpiled ivory from southern Africa to Japan could go ahead.

Some African countries want a 20-year ban on trading ivory.

The two-week meeting in The Hague will also seek protection for the sawfish, cedar, and some corals.

Conservation groups are targeting China's tiger farming business.

The three-yearly CITES meetings set restrictions on trade in species regarded as endangered or threatened.

This year's summit on the 32-year old treaty brings 175 national delegations to The Hague, along with other UN agencies, and conservation and animal welfare organisations.

Opposing visions

Two starkly different approaches to the largely banned ivory trade will be up for discussion.

CITES EXPLAINED

Threatened organisms listed on three appendices depending on level of risk

Appendix 1 - all international trade banned

Appendix 2 - international trade monitored and regulated

Appendix 3 - trade bans by individual governments, others asked to assist

"Uplisting" - moving organism to a more protective appendix,

"downlisting" - the reverse

Conferences of the Parties (COPs) held every three years

CITES administered by UN Environment Programme (Unep)

Kenya and Mali are seeking a total 20-year moratorium, while Botswana and Namibia are seeking increased exports.

CITES has twice before granted southern African countries the right to export ivory from stockpiles to Asia.

Concerns over mechanisms for monitoring the trade had prevented the second sale, approved in 2002, from taking place.

But on the eve of the meeting, a technical committee decided that mechanisms to monitor poaching in Africa were sufficiently effective, and that Japan had established proper safeguards to ensure only the designated ivory was imported. South Africa, Botswana and Namibia will sell 60 tonnes to the Asian nation.

Conservationists believe any extension in legal exports will fuel the already substantial illegal trade.

"Every time CITES even talks about relaxing the ivory ban, poaching goes up," said Peter Pueschel of the International Fund for Animal Welfare (Ifaw).

A recent report from the wildlife trade monitoring organisation Traffic said there were now 92 seizures of illegal ivory seizures each month.

All at sea

Fresh from a string of defeats at the International Whaling Commission in Alaska, Japan is trying another route to an expansion of whaling by asking CITES to review restrictions on trading whale meat.

Conservation and animal welfare organisations are also alarmed by China's bid for a relaxation of rules on trading products from tiger farms which have sprung up in recent decades.

"If you open up a legal trade in tiger parts, it opens up a huge demand which can obviously cause problems for the wild populations," observed Dave Eastham, head of wildlife at the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA).

The list of life-forms for which governments are seeking extra protection is dominated by marine organisms.

The sawfish, hunted for its spectacular rostrum (snout), the porbeagle shark, and the spiny dogfish (whose meat is sold in British fish and chip shops under the name rock salmon) are all being depleted fast.

Red and pink corals, extracted principally in Asia and the Mediterranean and exported mainly to the US for use in necklaces, are also on the target list of conservation-minded governments.

However, there is opposition to listing some of these species, notably from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) which feels effective fisheries management would be a better and less bureaucratic option.

On land, protection is being sought for some rosewood and cedar trees. Pau Brazil, whose wood is used in top-of-the-range violin bows, may also gain protection.

One long-term issue likely to divide delegates is a proposal that development and poverty concerns should be taken into account when deciding CITES restrictions.

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Story from BBC NEWS:
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/science/nature/6715923.stm>

Published: 2007/06/03 04:32:04 GMT

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