



Trade in Endangered Species

Humans have always used wild animals and plants for their products, such as fruits and seeds for food, skins for clothing, wood for fires etc. Apart from its use for basic needs, wildlife has also been exploited for luxury items e.g. ornaments and fashion. At one time, when there were far fewer people on Earth and a lot more wildlife, such exploitation did not have any significant effect on the overall numbers of animals and plants. With over six billion people in the world today the situation is now very different. As a result of pressure from an ever-increasing human population, many species of animals and plants have been greatly reduced in numbers and they will not survive for much longer if we continue to kill them for luxury items. Modern technology and knowledge means that we can manufacture or find substitutes for products from endangered species: plastic for tortoiseshell or ivory, jojoba oil for whale oil, synthetic drugs for rhino horns and tiger bones. We can live very happily without leopard-skin coats, mahogany furniture, turtle soup or pet orang-utans.

Wildlife and the Law

Over the last 30 years or so there has been a growing world-wide concern that trade in endangered species should be controlled. In 1973, representatives from 80 countries met in Washington to draw up a formula for trade controls and licences. As a result of this meeting the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) was formed. The purpose of CITES is to decide which species in trade are in danger of becoming extinct and to establish laws to stop them from being pushed any closer by international trade. There are now at least 126 member countries and their representatives meet every two years for discussions and to decide whether any changes are needed. Environmental organisations can attend the conferences to contribute to the debates and to lobby the delegates.

When a country joins CITES, its government must pass laws to control or prohibit trade in live or dead specimens and parts or derivatives of them. The amount of trade allowed depends on which 'Appendix' (group) the species has been listed in. The rules for deciding which species should be listed in which appendix were set down at the very first CITES conference in Berne, Switzerland, in 1976, although they have been revised since then. Any member country can put forward a species for listing, or changing to another appendix, but to be adopted, two thirds of the delegates must vote for the proposal. A proposal is usually a scientific report summarising the best available information on the status of the species and the impact of trade on it. The Convention cannot control trade between two countries who are not CITES members, but fortunately the number of member countries is slowly increasing year by year.

There are three appendices:

Appendix I

trade is totally banned for primarily commercial purposes.

Appendix II

potentially threatened species for which trade is allowed if there is "no detriment" to the species: quotas (the numbers of individuals traded) may be imposed.

Appendix III

species requiring additional protection in their country of origin.

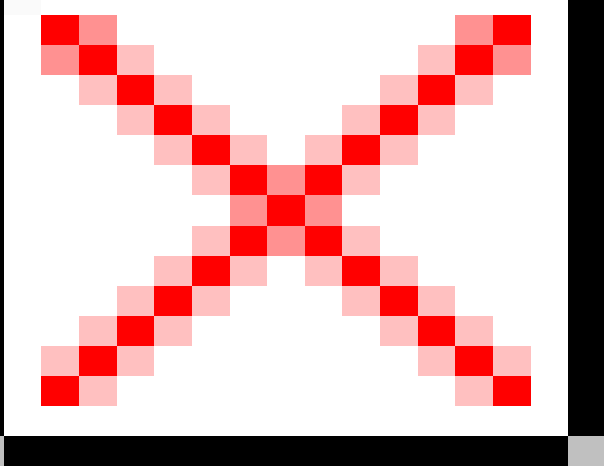
Enforcing the law

this is a difficult problem, especially when officials responsible for the enforcement don't take it seriously - and this happens all too often. Even CITES does not have a Law Enforcement Working Group. It is expensive to enforce a law and yet a law is useless unless it can be enforced.

Smuggling i.e. illegal trading, is not easy to control. It is easier to stop the poverty-stricken poacher than the rich, influential businessman, or, worse still, corrupted government official. It is also difficult for the customs officer to identify the protected species in a big shipment of animals and plants - especially as they are often hidden or disguised.

Of all the hundreds of species of animals and plants involved in international trading laws, amongst some of the best known examples are:- big cats, whales, elephants, rhinos, bears, parrots, apes and rainforest plants.

Here are some brief case histories



Fifty years ago there were eight subspecies of tiger, but three are now extinct. Today, all five remaining subspecies are endangered. The total number left in the world could be as low as 5,000. All tigers are in demand by Eastern countries because of their belief that tiger bones, claws, teeth and most other body parts have medicinal properties. China, South Korea and Taiwan are the main consumers but tiger products are also exported to Chinese communities in the rest of the world. China's own tigers are almost extinct so traders have turned to tigers in other countries and much illegal smuggling goes on. Tiger numbers are also declining because of the loss of their forest habitat and a shortage of prey.

Trade laws

Most tiger countries have laws protecting them, but they are often poorly enforced. Tigers are on Appendix I of CITES but five of the fourteen countries (which include China, India, Thailand, South Korea, Vietnam, Russia and Japan) have yet to join CITES - Bhutan, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Laos and North Korea. However, these five, together with the CITES members, have voluntarily pledged to stop international trade in tiger products and, within their countries, to ban the use of tiger bone in traditional medicine. These countries have formed the Global Tiger Forum to discuss ways of working together to help tiger populations recover.

The future

The protection laws must be enforced somehow if the tiger is to survive. The US government's action of imposing trade sanctions on Taiwan, and threatening to do the same to China, may help. Hopefully, the Global Tiger Forum's discussions will bring about effective enforcement. Conservation organisations have set up projects to try and control poaching and to win the support of people who live in tiger areas, and to persuade people to use alternatives to traditional tiger-based medicines.

