Open Letter from 50 Signatories

CITES at 50 Years:
Time to Get Ambitious About Halting Biodiversity Loss

Dear Parties to CITES and the CITES Secretariat,

On 3 March 2023, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) will celebrate its 50th anniversary. Heralded as the Convention to protect all species, from elephants and tigers to cacti and sea turtles, from overexploitation due to international trade, the agreement marked global recognition that wildlife overconsumption, primarily by profit-seeking industries, threatens wildlife. Unfortunately, this awakening is increasingly being overshadowed by a business-as-usual paradigm that continues to perpetuate and prioritize detrimental wildlife exploitation over conservation and recovery of wild species. As a result, today we face a grave biodiversity crisis in which a million species are threatened with extinction. In fact, exploitation is the primary driver of marine species loss and the secondary driver of terrestrial species extinctions.[1] Of all multilateral environmental agreements, CITES is uniquely equipped to meet the challenge of this crisis by regulating international wildlife trade.

CITES is effective. CITES is the only international treaty solely designed to address the direct exploitation of species in international trade,[2] and it is imperative that it play a vital and robust role in bringing about the transformational change necessary to confront the extinction crisis we face. The Convention's successes include reducing elephant poaching with the 1990 commercial ivory trade ban, aiding spotted cats, crocodilians and giant otters, and drawing attention to and stimulating conservation efforts for numerous species from rosewood to turtles and sea cucumbers. With a winning record of saving many species from extinction once listed,[3] CITES is considered a success because of: its global reach with 184 ratifying countries; its decision-making procedure whereby substantive decisions are made by a two-thirds majority of those voting when consensus is not attainable (rather than a consensus-only process where measures are watered down to meet the lowest common denominator); and its binding nature, where non-compliance can be sanctioned by enforceable trade prohibitions. At present, almost 40,000 species of animals and plants are protected by CITES against over-exploitation through international trade.

[1] IPBES (2019). Global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. E. S. Brondizio, J. Settele, S. Díaz, and H. T. Ngo (editors). IPBES secretariat, Bonn, Germany.

[2] The preamble to CITES provides "Recognizing, in addition, that international co-operation is essential for the protection of certain species of wild fauna and flora against over-exploitation through international trade."

[3] Sheikh, P. A., & Corn, M. L. (2016). The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) (p. 16). Congressional Research Service.

But CITES needs to go further to sufficiently protect species. The vast majority of wildlife species affected by trade are not covered by CITES and the range of targeted species continues to change and expand. When CITES first took effect, entire families, infraorders, and even orders of species, such as all cetaceans, primates, parrots, and orchids, were protected. Today, listing a single species, let alone a genus, requires a major effort and years of preparation. The Convention is decades behind in providing meaningful protections to thousands of species identified as facing a high risk of extinction.[4] Yet, wildlife trade has increased ten-fold since 1975 when CITES entered into force, and currently legal, yet unsustainable, trade poses a major threat to global biodiversity.[5] The Parties, championed and led by countries in the Global South, took a big step towards change at COP19, regulating trade in over 500 species. But much more must be done by CITES Parties to return to the treaty's plain language – protecting species that "are or may be affected by trade"[6] and ensuring species receive protections before, not after, populations face steep declines by applying the precautionary principle.

Scientific decision-making is needed. CITES is failing its scientific objectives – from specimen mis-identification, to questionable non-detriment findings, and unscientific quota setting. Today the Convention's limited resources are more frequently devoted to debate and increasing consideration of socio-economic issues, rather than the conservation science at CITES 'core. The Convention was specifically designed to consider only biological and trade criteria and to follow the precautionary principle.[7] Socio-economic factors were not included because they are driving biodiversity decline globally.[8] Science-based decision-making and the capacity to generate necessary data to support such decisions are sorely lacking.

Resources are insufficient. CITES is under-resourced and the lack of capacity and funding to properly implement the Convention remain crucial issues. There is a dire need to prioritize funding the Convention in order for it to fully meet its mandate and ensure the tools are available to meet the biodiversity crisis.

Conclusion

Nothing short of transformative change – "a fundamental, system-wide reorganization across technological, economic and social factors, including paradigms, goals and values"[9] – will suffice to disrupt the biodiversity crisis according to the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). Biodiversity underpins the health of the planet and

[4] Frank, E. G., & Wilcove, D. S. (2019). Long delays in banning trade in threatened species. Science, 363(6428), 686-688. https://science.sciencemag.org/content/363/6428/686.
[5] IPBES (2019): Chapter 3 of the Global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. E. S. Brondizio, J. Settele, S. Díaz, and H. T. Ngo (editors). IPBES secretariat, Bonn, Germany. Page 156.
[6] CITES, art. II paragraph 1.
[7] Favre, D. S. (1997). The risk of extinction: A risk analysis of the Endangered Species Act as compared to CITES. NYU Envtl. LJ, 6, 341.
[8] Favre, D. S. (1997). The risk of extinction: A risk analysis of the Endangered Species Act as compared to CITES. NYU Envtl. LJ, 6, 341; Favre, D. (1993). Debate within the CITES community: what direction for the future. Nat. Resources J., 33, 875.
[9] IPBES (2019) Summary for policymakers of the global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services.

benefits all our lives providing pollination, water purification, carbon sequestration, and disease regulation.[10] CITES can play its role by reducing the exploitation driver of species loss, but only if Parties to CITES demand and create real change to ensure the Convention: protects species in need in accordance with the precautionary principle; is applied based on robust scientific decision-making; and has adequate funding to combat biodiversity loss.

The undersigned organizations and experts therefore call on all CITES stakeholders to do all they can to meet the moment and address the biodiversity crisis head on by using the Convention to effectively reduce wildlife exploitation through international trade. The next 50 years of CITES lay before us. Biodiversity is dramatically threatened by a combination of factors, and CITES has a critical role to play as part of the solution to the crisis. We must chart a more ambitious and visionary course and return to the Convention's founding mission of international cooperation to protect species against over-exploitation through international trade. Life on Earth depends on it.

Sincerely,

Center for Biological Diversity
Pro Wildlife
ADM Capital Foundation
AGEREF/CL Burkina Faso
Animal Defenders International
Animal Welfare Institute
Animal Wellness Action
Born Free USA
Born Free Foundation
Buffalo Field Campaign
CATCA Environmental and Wildlife Society
Center for a Humane Economy
Center for International Environmental Law
David Shepherd Wildlife Foundation
Defenders of Wildlife
EARTHDAY.ORG
East Caribbean Coalition for Environmental Awareness (ECCEA)
Ecoflix
Elephant Reintegration Trust
Endangered Species Coalition
Environmental Investigation Agency
Fondation Franz Weber
FOUR PAWS
Friends of Merrymeeting Bay

[10] Ceballos, G., et al. (2015). Accelerated modern human–induced species losses: Entering the sixth mass extinction. Science advances, 1(5), e1400253.

Future for Elephants
German Animal Welfare Federation
Great Old Broads for Wilderness PNW Wildlife Interest Group
Heartwood
Humane Action Pittsburgh
Humane Society International
International Marine Mammal Project of Earth Island Institute
Pan African Sanctuary Alliance
Kentucky Heartwood
Law of the Wild
Natural Resources Defense Council
Olympic Park Advocates
Predator Defense
Project Coyote
Resource Renewal Institute
Robin des Bois
Save Our Sky Blue Waters
ONG PALMEIRINHA
The Humane Society of the United States
Turtle Island Restoration Network
Washington Wildlife First
Western Watersheds Project
WILD Foundation
WildAid
Wildlife Impact
Wyoming Wildlife Advocates