

Backgrounder: Understanding CITES

Thousands of species around the world are endangered or at risk as a result of human activities such as habitat destruction, over-harvesting and pollution. CITES was adopted in 1973 to address the threat posed by just one of these activities: unsustainable international trade. With some 169 Parties, CITES is one of the world's most important agreements on species conservation and the non-detrimental use of wildlife.

Even after commercial fishing and the timber industry are set aside, the international trade in wildlife is big business, estimated to be worth billions of dollars annually and to involve more than 350 million plant and animal specimens every year. Unregulated international trade can push threatened and endangered species over the brink, especially when combined with habitat loss and other pressures.

Three ways to regulate

CITES provides three regulatory options in the form of Appendices. Animals and plants listed in **Appendix I** are excluded from international commercial trade except in very special circumstances. Appendix I contains about 530 animal species and a little more than 300 plant species, including all the great apes; various big cats such as cheetahs, the snow leopard and the tiger; numerous birds of prey, cranes, and pheasants; all sea turtles; many species of crocodiles, tortoises and snakes; and some cacti and orchids.

Commercial international trade is permitted for species listed in **Appendix II**, but it is strictly controlled on the basis of CITES permits. This Appendix II covers over 4,460 animal species and 28,000 plant species, including all those primates, cats, cetaceans, parrots, crocodiles and orchids not listed in Appendix I.

Finally, **Appendix III** includes species that are protected within the borders of a member country. An Appendix-III listing allows a country to call on others to help it regulate trade in the listed species. This Appendix lists over 290 species.

CITES, then, does much more than regulate trade in large charismatic mammals. It sets up a green certification system for non-detrimental wildlife trade (based on CITES permits and certificates), combats illegal trade and related wildlife offences, promotes international cooperation, and helps to establish management plans so that range States can monitor and sustainably manage CITES-listed species.

CITES requires each member State to adopt the necessary national legislation and officially designate a Management Authority that issues trade permits. Governments must also designate a Scientific Authority to provide scientific advice on imports and exports. These national authorities are responsible for implementing CITES in close cooperation with Customs, wildlife enforcement, police or similar agencies.

As the impact of trade on a population or a species increases or decreases, the species can be added to the CITES Appendices, removed from them, or transferred from one Appendix to another. These decisions are to be based on the best biological information available and an analysis of how different types of protection can affect specific populations.

It is worth noting that when a species is transferred from Appendix I to Appendix II, its protection has not necessarily been 'downgraded'. Rather, it can be a sign of success that a species population has grown to the point where well-regulated trade may be possible. In addition, by allowing a species to be commercially traded at sustainable levels, an Appendix-II listing can actually improve protection by giving local people a greater stake in the species survival.