C.I.T.E.S. Essay, Research Paper

Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species.

C.I.T.E.S.

The International wildlife trade, worth billions of dollars annually, has caused massive declines in the numbers of many species of animals and plants. The extent of the decline because of the trade aroused so much concern for the survival of species that an international treaty was drawn up in 1973 to protect wildlife against over-exploitation and also to prevent international trade from threatening species with extinction.

Known as C.I.T.E.S, and sometimes known as the Washington Convention, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, came into force on 1 July 1975 and at present has a membership of signatories of around 150 countries. These countries act by banning commercial international trade in an agreed list of endangered species and by regulating and monitoring trade in others that might become endangered.

There of over 13,000 known species mammals and birds as well as thousands of reptiles, amphibians and fish, millions of invertebrates and some 250,000 flowering plants. It is fair to say that extinction is a natural feature of the evolution of life on Earth. However in recent times humans have, to a large extent been responsible for the loss of most of the animals and plants that have disappeared.

Many species are declining in number basically because of a loss of habitat and increased exploitation as the human population grows. Trade has also become a major factor in the decline as improvement in transport facilities has made it possible to ship live animals and plants and their products anywhere in the world.

The wildlife trade is a highly lucrative business and involves a wide variety of species, not only as live specimens but also as products. Millions of animals and plants are traded each year to supply the demand for pets and ornamental plants. Furskins, leather and timber, and articles manufactured from these materials are all traded in large quantities.

C.I.T.E.S. has established a world wide system of controls on International trade in threatened wildlife and wildlife products by stipulating that government permits are required for such trade. Protection is provided for species in three main categories.

Appendix one: of the convention, includes all species threatened with extinction

which are or may be affected by trade.

Appendix two: of the convention, includes all species which, although not

necessarily currently threatened with extinction may become so unless trade is

subject to strict regulation.

Appendix three: of the convention, all species that any party identifies as being

subject to regulation within its jurisdiction for the purpose of preventing or restricting

exploitation. The corporation of other parties, is therefore, needed.

Without a doubt C.I.T.E.S. is much needed, wherever human populations increase, generally animal populations decrease. The African elephant is very much a case in point. Elephants are a wide-ranging keystone species in the habitats where they occur. For centuries elephants have been exploited: for ivory, as a weapon of war, ceremonial purposes, by the logging industry, and by zoos and circuses. Elephant populations have greatly declined due to habitat destruction, increased agriculture and the ivory trade. Rampant poaching halved Africa’s elephant population from 1.4 million in 1979 to around 600,00 in 1989 and even today elephant populations are dangerously low although the situation has stabilised, due in large part to the 1990 C.I.T.E.S. ban on international ivory sales.

Unfortunately however many sub Saharan countries including Zimbabwe, Botswana and Namibia have large stockpiles of elephant tusks, confiscated from poachers. These countries are desperately poor and would greatly benefit from the foreign currency that a sale of their ivory would generate. This is why some African and far eastern countries are once again looking to lift the C.I.T.E.S. trade sanctions. South Africa is another trader in elephant products and although they do not sell ivory, there is a large trade of elephant hides and leather goods as well as live Elephants for export.

Another argument for a lifting of the sanctions is that many farmers are finding it hard to coexist with elephants. As the human population ever increases, roaming elephant herds have begun butting up against villages and towns. While Masai herdsmen live with the elephant population by leaving their livestock unfenced and letting the animals walk through their land, farmers who have tried to barricade their crops from migrating wildlife have created trouble for themselves. Many farmers see elephants as a pest — or even an active danger to their lives. Elephants when hungry can destroy a seasons crop, the culprit (guilty or not) may be hunted down and forced to pay the price of the damage with its life. There are now scientists who are working on a remedy for this problem which will suit both parties. One solution which has been developed is a pepper-spray bomb that wards off elephants by attacking their sensitive eyes with airborne pepper molecules. The elephant recovers soon after, having learned to stay clear of the fields.

Countries which support the lifting of the ban say that the elephant has sufficiently recovered in number to justify a small trade in ivory. However if the hunting of elephants and the sale of ivory was seen to be justified by C.I.T.E.S. no matter how small in scale an open ivory market would be a sign to poachers and farmers that it is OK to shoot elephants indiscriminately, it would be very hard to manage any arrangements made and would probably mean the extinction of the African elephant.

It s the consumer that s really killing the elephant.

When the buying stops, the killing can too. Messages like this are regularly put around in far eastern countries, most especially in China and Japan. With a combined population of about 1.4 billion, they are, along with Western Europe and the U.S.A. the most veracious consumers of a huge variety of illegal wildlife including tigers, clouded leopards, Asiatic bears, gibbons, deer and elephants.

It is estimated that over two tons of wild snakes are consumed daily in Shanghai alone. As well as the sheer scale of the trade there are grave welfare concerns. For example in restaurants, macaques are killed by stuffing them into bags and cooking them in boiling water and primates, valued for their brains, are served while still alive. A recent government survey revealed that half the Chinese interviewed had eaten wildlife species and 1/3 were unaware of the environmental impact of this consumption.

Elephant products are greatly used in the Far East, not only for medical use but also for their aesthetic qualities.

Prized for its texture, durability and rich creamy colour ivory has been traded for centuries. In Europe, ivory was inlaid into furniture, sculpted into combs and brooches, and used as the favoured material for piano keys. Ivory exports from Africa peaked in about 1900 – at the height of colonisation. However the demand for ivory is also strongly entrenched in Asian culture, Taiwan and Hong Kong have had major ivory carving industries for hundreds of years. In Japan – which remains one of the world s major consumers of ivory – the substance is used for making traditional personal seals called hankos. Ivory is also a vital ingredient in Chinese medicines and ground ivory is sometimes used as an aphrodisiac.

Demand for the elephant tusk continued to grow from the 1940s to the 1980s – when it reached its highest ever levels. Carved into chess sets, chops sticks, jewellery and walking sticks, ivory was sometimes seen as a hedge against rising inflation. The availability of automatic weapons and widespread government corruption meant that ivory could be produced in ever – greater quantities. Although Hong Kong and Japan have dominated the consumer market for raw ivory for decades, demand for the finished ivory goods was fairly high in the west until the trading ban was introduced in 1989.

Ten years ago, the United States was one of the largest importers of worked ivory (valued at $11.8 million annually), behind Japan (which accounted for 38% of trade) and the European community (accounting for 18%). however as the demand grew, the elephants began to dwindle. following an environmental outcry, alternatives to ivory were sought out. piano keys began to be made of plastic. ivory trinkets and jewellery became virtually taboo in many western countries. before the international ban in 1989, raw ivory was fetching somewhere between 60 – 90 per lb, now the price has plummeted to about 6 per lb. This is proof enough if proof is needed that the C.I.T.E.S. sanctions are working and there is a need for a ban on ivory and elephant products.

At the moment elephant populations are slowly increasing, however in the long term it is up to the C.I.T.E.S. member country signatories to hold their nerve against pressure from the pro-trade lobby and to listen to game scouts who work in the field policing the ban, individuals who risk their lives on the front line of the war against poaching.