

Is CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) a tool to support the management of sustainable and legal wildlife trade? If you are a follower of conservation news the answer to this question may not be obvious given how the headlines are largely dominated by stories of illegal trade in a few charismatic fauna species. However, of the over 35,000 species covered by the Convention, over 96% are listed in Appendix II, which is meant to regulate their sustainable and legal trade.

EDITORIAL

So what is sustainable wildlife trade and why is it hard to achieve (or is it?), and what role should CITES have in facilitating sustainable and legal international wildlife trade? And beyond CITES, how can we ensure that wildlife trade features as both conservation opportunity and threat in the Global Biodiversity Framework post-2020, currently under development?

Wildlife trade encompasses a wide range of species and products: timber for construction, species for display, ornamentation, and as pets, skins used in the fashion industry, plant ingredients in cosmetics and health products, plant and animal products in medicine and food, and so much more.

A recent assessment by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) identified overexploitation as the key driver of species loss. While a logical response is to stop exploitation and use of wildlife, the opposite, somewhat counterintuitively, remains true: sustainable and equitable use and trade in species brings about benefits both to conservation and livelihoods. The evidence for this has been well illustrated, e.g. through case studies on various taxa under the CITES and Livelihoods theme of work. So why is this approach to addressing pressing conservation and development issues not more widely practiced? The conditions of what makes “good” wildlife trade work are complex, often with obstacles that are seemingly hard to overcome.

Consumers, businesses, and governments are often ignorant of the scale of and threats posed by illegal and unsustainable wildlife trade, or the benefits deriving from sustainable and legal trade: the trade in wild species is often “hidden” in products and along supply chains. Despite being a contributor to economic development—from rural economies, through to export-import taxation and levies—wildlife trade threats and benefits are absent in narratives such as “natural capital”, “circular economy”, or “sustainable consumption and production”. The knowledge base, e.g. on the value of wildlife trade in supply chains and economies, needs to be developed and integrated into the relevant frameworks.

Wildlife consumer behaviour change approaches are often directed at reducing demand for endangered wildlife products and are oriented towards a particular “wildlife consumer”. While this is indeed an essential intervention, a complementary approach is needed to encourage sustainable consumption to help change consumer choice towards purchasing, using and consuming verifiably sustainable and legally traded species and products.

Wildlife supply chains and the interactions of the stakeholders involved are often complex, and the answer to “what is sustainable wildlife trade” is wide-ranging and nuanced. In an age of communication saturation, messages must be simple and target the right audience to be effective.

Differences of perspective between those stressing animal welfare/rights issues and those advocating sustainable use as a conservation tool may block constructive solutions that involve use and trade in wildlife, and are often misrepresented, with some of the more successful examples of trade benefits to species and communities often overlooked. Current policy discussions, including in the context of CITES, are often skewed towards more charismatic species, with scant attention paid to plants and other species. Such “blindness” hinders efforts to find solutions to addressing wildlife trade legality and sustainability. More case studies across different taxa, geographies, and governance systems are needed.

Much of the trade in wildlife is unregulated, and even where it is regulations may have been developed with no consideration of the impact on stakeholders; moreover, they may be poorly implemented or the trade unsustainable. Addressing this requires solutions that respond to underlying challenges such as corruption and lack of good governance. The evidence of how responsible wildlife trade practices assist, and in some cases drive the reduction of illegal wildlife trade, needs to be demonstrated more widely.

CITES, the key policy mechanism to enable sustainable international trade in wildlife, is often misunderstood by those affected by it, and rather than enabling trade, it is often perceived as a hindrance (see pp. 79–88 for an overview of work on the trade in CITES-listed medicinal and aromatic plants). This may have negative conservation and livelihood impacts, as trade chains shift to non-CITES listed species. On the other hand, government agencies often lack capacity to conduct sustainability studies to make non-detriment findings (NDFs) or to enforce the Convention adequately.

The 18th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to CITES, in August 2019, presented many reasons to be positive and offered constructive solutions to help the Convention work better for the wide range of species it covers (see pp. 48–58 for an overview of this meeting). They ranged from agreeing on the definition of “traceability”, exploring whether non-regulatory efforts (e.g. via implementation of voluntary standards and certification schemes such as FairWild) can assist the implementation of CITES regulations, providing practical assistance to government agencies to conduct NDFs, and much more. These developments are supportive of addressing some of the obstacles described above. At a global policy level, there are opportunities—such as under the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework negotiations—for greater commitment to address the threats of unsustainable, illegal trade, reduce overexploitation, and to support systems and tools that maximise the benefits that derive from legal and sustainable wildlife trade.

TRAFFIC is looking to build partnerships with organisations mandated to work both on wildlife trade and conservation issues to ensure positive conservation outcomes from sustainable trade; this, in turn, will help to secure healthy and enduring resources on which we all depend.

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