

A glow of cautious optimism was evident in Thailand, the Land of Smiles, as the 16th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (CoP16) to CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) concluded its two-week proceedings on 14 March 2013. Member governments had taken much-needed action to extend CITES trade controls to a range of vulnerable and valuable timber and shark species as a complement to other sustainable management measures. There were also critical agreements about action and accountability with respect to efforts to close down illegal trade and markets for elephants, rhinoceroses and other endangered species banned from trade under CITES.

EDITORIAL

In many respects the positive results of the Conference were a pleasant surprise. Just three years ago, the conclusions of the 15th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to CITES (CoP15) were greeted with a chorus of dismay about the apparent prevalence of interests vested in short-term commercial gains from unsustainable wildlife trade and the increasing symptoms of CITES being an ailing treaty struggling for relevance in the global politics of the time.

So what changed and why? The tone was set from the opening statements of the Conference: the Thai Prime Minister's bold statement of intent to close down the country's ivory markets; UNEP Executive Director Achim Steiner's recognition of the relevance of CITES in a world of increasing demand for natural resources and on a planet where unsustainable patterns of consumption and production are shrinking, rather than husbanding, that crucial resource base; and CITES Secretary-General John Scanlon's remark that illegal trade in wildlife has reached a scale that poses an immediate risk to wildlife and to people, including those serving in the front-lines to protect wildlife, in part owing to increasing involvement of organized crime syndicates and in some cases rebel militias. Each echoed the growing voice of global concern about the seriousness of wildlife crime and its increasingly harmful environmental, economic and social impacts.

Sadly, a principal trigger for this concern is the wave of poaching and illegal trade that has built up to crisis levels for rhinoceroses and elephants over the past few years. For rhinoceros horn trade, new market demands in Viet Nam have been the central driver of runaway poaching levels in South Africa. For elephant ivory, indicators of poaching and illegal trade levels indicate that commercial pressure is increasing, despite the existence of a CITES action plan that aimed to motivate efforts to close down illegal markets and trade routes.

As reported in the editorial of the last issue of this journal, the policy-level response to these facts has been

vigorous, with wildlife trafficking raised for the first time in the UN General Assembly, high level statements by Gabon's President and the US Secretary of State, among others. New resources have been mobilized for engagement by INTERPOL, the World Customs Organization, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, and for the development of regional wildlife enforcement networks.

That said, arguably the biggest practical impact of this policy concern at CoP16 was a change in tone in the critical debates about CITES-listings for shark and timber species under serious exploitation pressure and for which proponents argued that regulatory controls under CITES would complement other management measures and help ensure sustainable trade levels in future. For the sharks, a tough debate largely focused on valid questions about practical implementation challenges, rather than opposition to the principle of CITES listing for commercial fishery species that has been heard at previous CoPs. And for the timber species, including Malagasy ebony and rosewood species subjected to high levels of illegal harvest in recent years for trade to Asian markets, a CITES Appendix II-listing was remarkably agreed by consensus.

For the pachyderm species in the spotlight, a range of measures were agreed that greatly increase compliance pressure on source, transit and market countries to take rapid action to address illegal trade, along with new initiatives to support those individual national efforts through new international law enforcement approaches, such as use of forensic methods to assess origin of ivory seizures.

It would be wrong to paint an unblemished picture of this reinvigoration of CITES. Its Secretariat remains woefully under-funded and debate at the CoP sometimes drifted back to the days when listing in the CITES Appendices was viewed simply as a flag of conservation concern, rather than an evidence-based judgement that the treaty's specific trade measures could help prevent unsustainable international trade. Nevertheless, the concerns driving key decisions at CoP16 were undeniably powerful and the policy outcomes overall demonstrated an intent by governments to seek solutions.

As ever, the real test of this intent will be the actions taken—the implementation of trade measures introduced for those shark, timber and other newly-listed species, and whether countries under the CITES compliance spotlight make effective interventions and whether they are held to account if they fail to do so. The level of global policy concern about illicit wildlife trade is arguably stronger now than at any time in CITES's 40-year history. If this can indeed be translated into effective action, the glow of optimism might well be brighter still when the Convention's member governments convene again in South Africa in 2016.

Steven Broad, Executive Director,
TRAFFIC