

Opening to the sound of delegates participating in a plenary-wide drum workshop and closing with the equally regular beat of the Chair's gavel marking agreement on a remarkable array of new decisions, resolutions and listing proposals, the seventeenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties (CoP17) to CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) has been widely heralded a conservation success.

Held in Johannesburg, South Africa, from 24 September to 4 October 2016, and reportedly attended by 3500 participants representing 152 governments, international

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organizations, non-governmental organizations and media, CoP17 was certainly the largest meeting of the Convention to date. In closing comments, the CITES Secretary-General, John E. Scanlon stated, "The most critical meeting in the 43-year history of CITES has delivered for the world's wildlife. CoP17 is a game changer for the planet's most vulnerable wild animals and plants."

It is indeed true that there were some very positive decisions reached at this meeting. CITES Appendix II regulation will be introduced for various commercially important species of sharks, rays and rosewoods. Proposals to re-open commercial trade in ivory and rhinoceros horn were not approved, at least in part because of valid concerns that current over-heated markets for these commodities manipulated by organized and adaptive criminals pose unacceptable risks that legal trade options would not deliver claimed benefits. The meeting also made progress on some important policy matters gaining traction for the first time, including enhancement of the role of local communities in CITES decision making, recognition of the impact of corruption in undermining wildlife trade regulation, the potential of strategic demand reduction actions, the development of systems for legal trade traceability and measures to improve verification of captive-breeding claims.

Indeed, there is much to celebrate, albeit with the usual proviso that it is effective action, not encouraging words that will prove the eventual worth of the decisions taken. On that front, the continued international attention to the conservation, economic and security implications of illegal wildlife trade and associated criminality is certainly bringing important new actors and resources to the CITES table. Running alongside the CoP this time was a global meeting of the Wildlife Enforcement Networks, a session of the INTERPOL Wildlife Crime Working Group and a packed timetable of other side events on topics ranging from forensic science to cybercrime. There is no doubt that international co-operation and local action within many countries to address wildlife trade challenges are as vigorous now as at any time since CITES was crafted.

Nevertheless, there is undoubtedly room for further improvement. CITES is often billed as "the environmental treaty with teeth". This may be the case, but its drawn-out decision making, supported by an obviously under-resourced Secretariat, often means those teeth are employed to chew ponderously over key national compliance issues, rather than credibly threaten the sort of sharp bite that might prompt faster action.

At the same time, the basic "rules of the game", the listing criteria that member countries adopted to help guide their decisions about regulatory treatment for particular species, are in need of some thoughtful review and revision. As we reflected in the introduction to TRAFFIC's published recommendations on proposals to amend the CITES Appendices at CoP17, current criteria do not provide the sort of clear guidance needed to judge whether a proposed change in CITES regulatory treatment would, on balance, be "in the best interest of the conservation of the species concerned, and be a proportionate response to anticipated risks" (in the words of Resolution Conf. 9.24 (Rev. Conf. 16)).

Such judgement requires: a clear identification of a trade-related problem; a credible explanation of how the regulatory change proposed could help, alongside a balanced assessment of opportunities, risks and alternative solutions; and a realistic appraisal of the likelihood of adequate implementation and enforcement. More guidance is also needed on strategies for dealing with uncertainty in making such judgements, including on interpretation of often patchy biological and trade information. Moreover, as demonstrated by the recent habit of adopting ever more convoluted annotations to the Appendices, the range of recommended precautionary measures in CITES' regulatory armoury sorely needs to be modernized. Lessons must be learned from cases where long-term regulatory attention by CITES for species such as Asian pangolins and the African Grey Parrot have not delivered positive conservation outcomes—their listing in CITES Appendix I at this meeting is a sign of failure, not a cause for celebration.

That the CITES community has a strong rhythm moving forward is not in doubt and CoP17 may well prove to mark a breakthrough in international efforts to achieve the treaty's goals. With so much international interest in this subject, there is a unique opportunity right now to ensure CITES really does change the game and deliver positive outcomes for many species in the longer term, and bring wider conservation benefits. For many other species, the next few years leading to CITES CoP18 in Sri Lanka in 2019 are nothing short of critical.

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