

Protecting Species and Habitats through International Conventions



FELIX PATTON is a rhino ecologist. He has an MSc in Conservation Biology and a PhD based on research on individual rhino identification and social behaviour. He is a frequent contributor to SWARA.

BELOW: Both black rhinos and white rhinos are CITES Appendix I listed in East Africa.

In 1963 the General Assembly of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), recognizing and wanting to prevent the devastating effect unregulated trade could have on an individual species, called for “an international convention on regulations of export, transit and import of rare or threatened wildlife species or their skins and trophies.”

Ten years later, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) came into effect. CITES works to regulate the wildlife trade by prohibiting imports and exports of listed species unless certain conditions are met and the correct permit is used. It protects more than 35,000 different species of animal and plants whether alive or dead and includes readily recognizable parts or derivatives. Trade is regulated through a system of Appendices which come with their own set of rules.

Appendix I constitutes a general prohibition of trade of a list of species and only possible in

exceptional circumstances, while with Appendix II listed species, trade is allowed but under strict conditions because without those conditions the species would certainly become endangered.

Where a signatory nation (known as a Party) needs assistance from other Parties to protect a species, they can list it in Appendix III. States can unilaterally list a species in Appendix III, as opposed to the other two Appendices which require a vote of the Conference of the Parties (CoP) for amending.

The CoP is the decision-making body with each member establishing national Management and Scientific authorities, which can directly communicate with one another and are in charge of granting import and export permits. Trade with non-members is also possible if the non-member presents comparable documentation to that required by the Convention.

The CITES Strategic Vision 2008-2020 is: “Conserve biodiversity and contribute to its sustainable use by ensuring that no species of



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CONSERVATION

wild fauna or flora becomes or remains subject to unsustainable exploitation through international trade, thereby contributing to the significant reduction of the rate of biodiversity loss.”

WETLANDS

The Ramsar Convention obliges signatory states to wisely use their wetland territories, protect them and establish nature reserves on them for the benefit of people and nature.

The Ramsar system is based on the List of Wetlands of International Importance where a listed site is significant in terms of ecology, botany, zoology, limnology or hydrology and includes wetlands of international importance to waterfowl at any season.

The criteria for listing concerns the uniqueness or rarity of the type of wetland, its importance to biodiversity or its importance to fish or waterfowl -- “a wetland should be considered internationally important if it supports vulnerable, endangered, or critically endangered species or threatened ecological communities.”

When ‘urgent national interests’ are at stake, the Convention allows states at their own discretion to extend, delete or restrict the boundaries of a listed wetland.

Parties encourage research and the exchange of data and publications regarding wetlands and their flora and fauna, attempt to increase waterfowl populations on the designated wetlands and promote the training of personnel competent in the fields of wetland research, management and wardening.



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TOP: Due to ongoing population decline, a proposal to list giraffe in CITES Appendix II is to be considered in May.

BELOW: The rare and elusive shoebill stork thrives in Ugandan wetlands.

Wetlands of East Africa listed include Lake Nakuru (Kenya) and the Rwenzori Mountains, Murchison Falls and Lake Mburo (Uganda).

WORLD HERITAGE

The World Heritage Convention is probably one of the most well-known and prestigious international environmental conventions. Based on the World Heritage List, the Convention obliges its members to protect their natural and cultural heritage sites of outstanding universal value and focuses on habitats rather than individual species.

Natural heritage is defined as “natural features consisting of physical and biological formations or groups of such formations, which are of Outstanding Universal Value from the

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(Tanzania), with the Selous Game Reserve (Tanzania) listed as “in danger.”

MIGRATORY SPECIES

The Bonn Convention concentrates solely on the conservation status of migratory species and their habitats and ensuring the ecological integrity, connectivity and resilience of migration systems.

Migratory species are defined as “the entire population or any geographically separate part of the population of any species or lower taxon of wild animals, a significant proportion of whose members cyclically and predictably cross one or more national jurisdictional boundaries.”

The Convention uses an Appendix system of species. Appendix I gives the highest level of protection and contains migratory species which are endangered throughout all or a significant portion of their range. The ‘taking’, (defined as “hunting, fishing, capturing, harassing, deliberate killing or attempting to engage in any such conduct”) of Appendix I species, is prohibited except for scientific purposes, propagation for survival, and traditional subsistence.

Appendix II lists migratory species “which have unfavourable conservation status and which require international agreements for their conservation and management, as well as those

TOP: Sea turtles are listed in Appendix 1 of the Bonn Convention.

Human activities have tipped the scales against the survival of these ancient mariners. Nearly all species of sea turtle are classified as Endangered. Slaughtered for their eggs, meat, skin and shells, sea turtles suffer from poaching and over-exploitation. They also face habitat destruction and accidental capture in fishing gear.

which have a conservation status which would significantly benefit from the international cooperation that could be achieved by an international agreement.”

Parties are obliged to acknowledge the importance of conservation and take action particularly to avoid any migratory species becoming endangered. Parties “should promote, co-operate in and support research relating to migratory species; shall endeavour to provide immediate protection for migratory species included in Appendix I; and shall endeavour to conclude ‘agreements’ covering the conservation and management of migratory species included in Appendix II.”

BIOLOGICAL BIODIVERSITY

The Convention on Biological Diversity is aimed at conserving global biodiversity meaning not just species protection or just habitat protection, but rather to provide a framework for global biodiversity protection. It also covers the sustainable use of the components of biological diversity and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources. Its scope ranges from combating deforestation and desertification to managing fragile ecosystems on land and at sea.

The Convention gives attention to the equal division of benefits between developed and developing countries. A framework agreement lays down a basic structure of principles and objectives, which have then to be executed and perfected through subsequent instruments.

There are 13 obligations regarding in-situ conservation and five for ex-situ (e.g. zoos) conservation.

Actions are meant to be carried out within the context of an ecosystem approach -- "a strategy for the integrated management of land, water and living resources that promotes conservation and sustainable use in an equitable way."

Any action should be subject to an Environmental Impact Assessment or a Minimizing Adverse Impact assessment especially where action may affect a neighbouring state.

The broadly formulated Convention text has been criticised as being too vague and ineffective leaving Parties with ample room for discretion such that it is difficult to determine if a Contracting Party is complying or violating it.

EFFECTIVENESS

While it is clear that a large body of law exists with regard to wildlife and habitat protection, its success relies on range states interpreting and executing their treaty obligations seriously and to the full. Enforcement by governments and their respective judicial systems is essential to combat criminal activity but is often sadly lacking with species and habitats continuing to be in decline. ●

Controlling invasive weeds, such as the water hyacinth on Lake Victoria, must be controlled to prevent restricting biodiversity. When not controlled, water hyacinth will cover lakes and ponds entirely affecting water flow and blocking sunlight from reaching aquatic plants which often die. The decay processes depletes oxygen in the water, often killing fish. The plants also create a prime habitat for mosquitos, and a species of snail known to host a parasitic flatworm which causes snail fever.



The governments of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania have signed up to five major international multilateral conservation treaties to protect species and their habitats:

1971

Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat

1972

UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (World Heritage Convention)

1973

Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)

1979

Bonn Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals

1992

Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)