



# Mark Carwardine's **AT A GLANCE...**

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CITES

## WHAT IS CITES?

CITES – the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora – is an agreement between governments designed to ensure that international trade in wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival. It entered into force on 1 July 1975 and now has near-universal support: 183 countries (known as 'Parties') are signed up. The CITES Secretariat is administered by the UN, in Geneva, Switzerland. Funding comes from Parties and external sources such as the European Union.

## WHY IS IT NEEDED?

Illegal international trade in wildlife is big business worth tens of billions of dollars every year and is run by dangerous international traffickers, many of whom are also involved in illegal drugs and arms smuggling. Tens of thousands of species of wild animals and plants are sold illegally for profit as food, pets, ornamental plants, tourist curios and medicine.

## HOW DOES CITES WORK?

All exports and imports of registered animals and plants, and their products, must be authorised through a licensing system that is implemented by the Parties through national legislation. The species are listed in three Appendices, according to the degree of protection they need. Parties submit proposals for species to be added, removed or moved

from one Appendix to another, and these are discussed at the triennial Conference of the Parties (CoP). This is one of the most high-profile events on the conservation calendar – the 17th CoP took place in Johannesburg in September 2016.

## WHAT ARE THE THREE APPENDICES?

Appendix I is for species threatened with extinction, and bans all trade except in exceptional circumstances. Appendix II is for species not necessarily threatened with extinction, but in which trade must be controlled. Appendix III is for species that are protected in at least one country, which has asked other countries for assistance in controlling the trade.

## HAS CITES SOLVED THE TRADE PROBLEM?

It has made a big difference. Since its ratification, only one species – Spix's macaw – is known to have become extinct in the wild as a result of trading. Today, it provides varying degrees of protection to more than 35,000 species, including about 930 species on Appendix I, ranging from tigers and great whales to dugongs and giant pandas.

## BUT IT'S NOT PERFECT.

Wildlife smuggling continues on a large scale for many reasons: legislation in some countries is inadequate, penalties are often too low and there aren't enough well



CITES moved to ban all international trade in pangolins at this year's CoP.

trained customs officials.

Also, the regulations only apply to trade between countries (not domestic trade) and, of course, non-signatories such as North Korea and South Sudan are not bound by CITES decisions. Other issues include the fact that any Party can exempt itself from a decision by taking out a 'reservation' within a 90-day 'grace' period; some votes are by secret ballot (which allows political horse-trading on the more controversial proposals); and there's one vote per nation, meaning that the vote of a small island state carries the same weight as one from Japan, China or America.

## WHAT HAPPENED AT THE MOST RECENT CONFERENCE?

At the time of writing, more than 3,000 delegates were still considering no fewer than 62 proposals to change CITES trade controls affecting nearly 500 species, from rosewood and sharks to African elephants and psychedelic rock geckos. Early in the proceedings, it was agreed that all eight pangolin species will be transferred from Appendix II to Appendix I, effectively banning all international trade, and a decade-long attempt by South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe to resume trade in elephant ivory was decisively rejected. 🐘

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**MARK CARWARDINE** is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

● Every month he demystifies some of the most important issues affecting the world's wildlife and assesses the organisations that protect it.

● Read more about the latest CITES conference in the December issue.