

CITES - why, how ... and does it work?

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CITES is an abbreviation for "Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora".

This convention has its headquarters in Lausanne, Switzerland and its existence is due to the voluntary contributions of participating countries (not all countries are signatories and motions taken are only binding in these participating countries).

The convention was first signed in Washington, D.C. on March 3, 1973 where regulations were laid down consisting of 25 Articles explaining the modus operandi of this convention.

The aim of CITES is to limit the international trade in fauna and flora which the participants identify as requiring special protection to save them from extinction. Identification of endangered species appears to be subjective and depends on how hard a certain interest group pushes its point of view. A few examples will demonstrate that these decisions are not always taken objectively.

Anyone with access to the local media, when asked about CITES and the protection of species, will quote the drastic decline in rhinos, elephants, primates and maybe even the panda bear. These are fauna which are impressive to humans (i.e. large, maybe cuddly, easily noticeable, intriguing and command a high price when shot and parts are sold). The majority of people visit zoos and game reserves to look for the "big five", others come to Africa from America and Germany to shoot the "big five". Significant value is therefore placed on "large". Small is unfortunately not as important and if a certain small plant, insect or fish becomes extinct, who will notice?

At meetings of CITES, the large, the appealing and the impressive command a lot of discussion. All delegates

know elephants, crocodiles, Californian condors etc., but mention *Euphorbia symmetrica* and silence reigns. This is of course a natural reaction amongst the human race. The familiar is easy to talk about but the small and unknown is best left alone.

Research on rhinos will bring the researcher far more fame and recognition than studying an insignificant plant species.

A good example of the lack of attention that plants receive is contained in the latest Appendices I and II as adopted by the Conference of the Parties, valid as of 16 April 1993. These appendices list the species which are regarded as endangered. International trade in such species is severely limited. No field-collected plants, seeds or parts of plants may be exported from or imported to signatory countries. Export permits have to be obtained for all artificially grown plants or plant material of these species, and in the case of plant species appearing in Appendix I an import permit has to be obtained as well.

Under Flora, Euphorbiaceae, Genus *Euphorbia*, species are listed as Appendix II with reference 14 being "all species that are *not* succulent". This is probably an editorial mistake, but it effectively means that all succulent species besides those listed under Appendix I from Madagascar are not included under CITES and therefore no permit is required to trade in these species.

The fact that the *Euphorbia* species which appear in Appendix I (nine of them, all from Madagascar) are included here has nothing to do with whether they are endangered, eagerly sought after or can be traded at high prices, but likely to be due to submissions by foreign "authorities" on succulents, not by Madagascar itself.

In South Africa, many euphorbias are as rare as, indeed probably rarer in nature than those species on Appendix I from Madagascar (e.g. *E.*

clivicola, *E. symmetrica*, *E. obesa*, *E. namaquensis* and many others) and are probably just as sought after by collectors as the nine listed. However, legally speaking, none of these euphorbia species require a CITES permit due to the mistake written into the appendix.

Mexican cacti have a fair hearing and are in Appendix I in quantity. Hopefully, intensive research is behind the inclusion of more species onto this list. This, I hope, also goes hand in hand with protecting the plants in their natural habitat from road building works (as reported in a recent journal), overgrazing, urbanisation, farming practices and of course collectors.

A brief look at the plant genera and species included in CITES I reveals that there are vast inadequacies with regard to the status of many threatened plants. Where are the extremely rare euphorbias from Somalia and the other north-eastern African countries?

CITES in its present form, where realities differ from country to country and where the playing fields are not level, falls far short in protecting fauna and flora on an equitable basis.

The *Welwitschia* plant which is listed in CITES II, does not transplant well, is not eagerly sought after by collectors and without moisture will die within a week in the post (they have no xerophytic tissue). Furthermore tens of thousands of these plants are found in habitat in Namibia and South Angola.

A more balanced approach, including proper field research and evaluation, is required by the signatories to CITES before the Appendices I and II begin to put the various threatened species in perspective and address the problem of preventing the extinction of plant and animal species. Will the measures currently in place secure the black rhino's future in the wild? I do not think so. The cause must be treated and not the symptoms. Here uncontrolled expansion of poor third world populations will have to be addressed, otherwise rhinos plus a multitude of plants and animals will join the dodo in dreamland, whether we like it or not.

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