



CITES: solving the extinction crisis

What is CITES?

CITES is the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. It was established in 1973 and celebrates its 40th anniversary in 2013. It is an international agreement aimed at preventing trade in endangered species of plants and animals: this trade is worth billions of dollars every year and involves hundreds of millions of plant and animal specimens. Trade in animal and plant specimens (whole organisms, whether alive or dead, or their parts and derivatives), as well as factors such as habitat loss, can seriously reduce their wild populations and bring some species close to extinction. Its aim is to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten the survival of the species in the wild. CITES gives varying degrees of protection to 35,000 species of animals and plants. Species under threat from extinction are protected under 'Appendix I' of CITES. Commercial trade in wild-caught specimens of these species is illegal (permitted only in exceptional licensed circumstances). Many wildlife species in trade are not endangered: these are listed under 'Appendix II'. CITES aims to ensure that trade of Appendix II species remains sustainable and does not act detrimentally on wild populations, so as to safeguard these species for the future. Countries who sign up are agreeing to monitor trade in threatened species and their products that are exported and imported. Illegal imports and exports can result in seizures, fines and imprisonment, which discourages illegal trade.



How CITES works

Membership of CITES is voluntary. Each member country agrees to adopt legislation to implement CITES at the national level. All import, export, re-export or introduction of specimens or parts and derivatives of any species covered by CITES, has to be authorized through a licensing system and permits must be obtained. The scheme has its limitations: it is voluntary and countries can 'enter reservations' on specific species when they join or when Appendices are amended, and penalties may not necessarily match the gravity of the crime or be sufficient deterrent to wildlife smugglers. In addition, unlike other international agreements, such as the Montreal Protocol, CITES lacks its own financial mechanism for implementation at the national level and member States must contribute their own resources. However, taken overall, CITES has been responsible for ensuring that the international trade in wild animals and plants remains sustainable (Appendix II species), and for protecting species at risk of extinction (Appendix I).

CITES in numbers	
178	The number of contracting Parties signed up to the agreement
5,500	The number of listed animals
29,500	The number of listed plants
35,000	The number of listed species



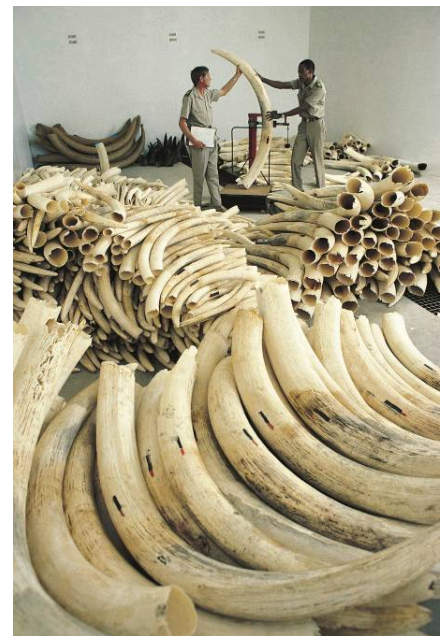
CITES today

Between 3rd and 14th March 2013, CITES member States met in Bangkok, Thailand, for the 16th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to CITES (CoP16). Some of the aims of the meeting were to adopt measures for combating overfishing, illegal logging and wildlife crime. 70 proposals from governments to regulate the trade in species were considered. One topic of discussion was elephants, as in recent years illegal ivory trade has significantly increased. Another controversial issue discussed at the meeting was the fate of polar bears: the USA proposed that all trade in bear parts be banned (something opposed by Canada and the Russian Federation). Around 400 bears a year are currently killed for this purpose. The role of CITES in its continued protection of rhinos was also considered: some conservationists believe that trophy hunting should be allowed as this has helped the rhino population to recover by bringing in revenue from tourism and financing conservation activities. Other scientists believe that there should be legalization of the rhino horn trade, as they blame the current ban for increasing the rewards from poaching. In 2012, 668 rhinos were killed by poachers in South Africa, and more than 100 died in the first three months of 2013. Several species of shark were under review at the meeting, as new reports have indicated that over 100 million sharks a year are being killed in commercial fisheries.

One of the positive outcomes of the meeting was the burgeoning relationship between China and the USA in co-sponsoring proposals to restrict trade in Asian turtles and tortoises. With these two countries representing the world's two biggest economies, their involvement in species conservation has the potential to make real changes in reversing the current extinction crisis.

Case study: Ivory trade in Thailand

There are about 6,500 elephants in Thailand, of which 2,500 live in the wild. The role of Thailand in the ivory trade was brought into question at CoP16, as it is legal there to sell ivory taken from native elephant, and criminals are believed to be using this possibility to sell ivory from African elephants as well. Thailand is believed to be second biggest market for tusks after China: it is estimated that between 50 and 100 African elephants a day are being killed to meet the demand. During the meeting, Thailand's prime minister said she would work towards amending her country's laws to ban the legal trade in ivory. No details were given about the timing and range of any ban. It is possible that part of the plan will involve increasing the DNA testing programme that provides information about the origin of tusks. Critics of this proposal cite a lack of clarity and detail regarding the proposed changes to the law. Others welcomed it as a step in the right direction.



A haul of ivory elephant tusks



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[CITES](#)

[CITES 40th anniversary video](#)

[CITES 40th anniversary brochure](#)

[BBC News report](#)



Questions

1. Outline the advantages and disadvantages of CITES as a means of preserving biodiversity.

6 marks

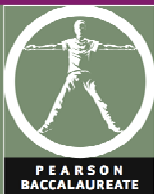
2. Complete the following table, summarizing the advantages and disadvantages of CITES compared to other approaches to conservation:

	Advantage	Disadvantage
CITES		
Protected areas		
Zoos		

12 marks

3. Why are international agreements needed?

2 marks



Environmental Systems and Societies

Suggested answers

1. Advantages of CITES: It is supported by many countries (178); it lists many species (ca. 35,000); it bans international trade in many products and species under Appendix I (i.e. species under threat of extinction); it regulates trade in Appendix II species to ensure sustainable use: this is made possible by the making of 'non-detriment findings', i.e. before an export can take place, a finding must be made that it will not be detrimental to the population of the species concerned; it has proven to be successful for many species; many countries have signed up to it: only 14 member States less than the United Nations *3 marks max*

Disadvantages of CITES: Enforcement is difficult; fines are relatively small and may not deter poaching and smuggling; support by some countries is limited and ineffectual; despite the agreement illegal hunting still occurs, e.g. poaching of elephants in Africa. *3 marks max*

2.

	Advantage	Disadvantage
CITES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can protect many species • Signed by many countries • Treaty works across borders • CITES is legally binding on the Parties and so they must implement the Convention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficult to enforce • Implementation varies from country to country • It does not take the place of national laws and Parties must adopt their own domestic legislation to ensure that CITES is implemented at the national level
Protected areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can conserve whole ecosystems • Allows research and education • Preserves many habitats and species • Prevents hunting and other disturbance from humans • Allows <i>in situ</i> conservation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be very expensive • Difficult to manage • Subject to outside forces that are difficult to control; • Difficult to establish in first place due to political issues/vested interests
Zoos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows controlled breeding and maintenance of genetic diversity • Allows research • Allows for education • Effective protection for individuals and species 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have historically preferred popular animals not necessarily those most at risk • Problem of reintroducing zoo animals to wild • <i>Ex situ</i> conservation and so do not preserve native habitat of animals

12 marks max

3. When problems cross borders (e.g. smuggling endangered species), international cooperation is vital; many issues are global and so require a global response; international agreements highlight issues involved in conservation and development across the globe; they can help motivate governments to take action and honour their commitments. *2 marks max*

Total marks = 20