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Opinionista Ivo Vegter

African nations should withdraw from CITES

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Ivo Vegter is a columnist and the author of *Extreme Environment*, a book on environmental exaggeration and how it harms emerging economies. He writes on this and many other matters, from the perspective of individual liberty and free markets. He is seldom wrong.

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The Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) has abandoned its original policy of sustainable utilisation of wildlife, under the influence of western animal rights groups. Africa ought to reject the power of rich elites in Europe or America to dictate how they manage their affairs.

Conferences of the parties to the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) are filled not only with government delegations, but also with representatives from a coterie of prominent animal rights groups. Although they do not have direct votes, they strongly influence the (nonsecret)

votes of many of the 182 government representatives to CITES. As a group, CITES easily outvotes proposals brought by countries which actually have to deal with the conservation of species, ensuring sustainable development and combating poaching.

The radical groups that have the ear of the US and European countries should not be confused with conservation organisations who advocate pragmatic wildlife management practices that ensure sustainable use of natural resources and recognise the needs of the societies that live alongside wildlife. On the contrary. Animal rights groups are strictly opposed to any form of consumptive use of wildlife, and to management techniques that involve potentially lethal methods. They want nature to be left untouched, except perhaps by ecotourism. They reject the principle of “sustainable utilisation”, which is the bedrock of conservation practice in many African countries, including South Africa.

It is time for African countries to ask the question: what good has CITES ever done for us? The answer, in terms of both conservation and sustainable development, is very little indeed. If one African country goes against CITES, there will be repercussions. Rich countries are economically and politically powerful. However, African countries would send a strong message about their own conservation and socio-economic development interests by withdrawing from CITES *en bloc*.

There is rich irony in the idea that African countries can be outvoted in their wildlife management practices by rich countries which don't have to manage the animals in

question. In Europe, everyone lives in carefully planned cities or state-subsidised picture-postcard agricultural idyll. The largest wild animal that is still fairly abundant is the house fly, and they're working on that. A dramatic [19th-century photo of a mountain of bison skulls](#) about to be shipped off to the fertiliser industry illustrates that the US has a similarly sketchy record in conserving its wildlife.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, rich tourists from both continents came to Africa to establish their fame as big white hunters. In an era when wildlife was treated as a common resource, the well-armed foreigners, when they weren't busy "converting" and "civilising" indigenous populations, spent their time illustrating [the tragedy of the commons](#). If everybody is responsible for a resource, nobody takes responsibility for it. Game species that once roamed the wide savannahs were decimated by indiscriminate hunting. Some of them went extinct.

The [response to this slaughter](#), according to Brian Child of Stellenbosch University, was effectively to nationalise wildlife and restrict or prohibit the commercial use of wildlife. Today, despite having so little wildlife left in their own countries, rich westerners are overcome with remorse, and determined to "save" Africa's remaining wildlife. But apparently Africans cannot be relied upon to manage their own wildlife. In 1975, an international body was established to decide how Africa (and other countries) should conserve what little wildlife the Europeans and Americans have left it.

African governments, some out of a desire for international respectability, others because of desire for

foreign aid and charitable donations, and yet others because trade prohibitions protected the corrupt poaching business, were happy to sign their sovereign rights away to CITES.

In their defence, the original aim of CITES was congruent with Africa's own approach to wildlife: sustainable use. This concept was formalised in the 1980 [World Conservation Strategy](#), prepared by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in association with the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), under which CITES falls. The subtitle of this document called for "living resource conservation for sustainable development" and its aims are to support continued economic and social development by maintaining essential ecological processes and life support systems, to preserve genetic diversity, and, particularly, "to ensure the sustainable utilisation of species and ecosystems, which support millions of rural communities as well as major industries".

The 1993 Convention on Biological Diversity [defines sustainable use](#) as "the use of components of biological diversity in a way and at a rate that does not lead to the long-term decline of biological diversity, thereby maintaining its potential to meet the needs and aspirations of present and future generations".

However, since those days, CITES has gone off the rails. It has become heavily influenced by animal rights groups which oppose the doctrine of sustainable use of wildlife. To them, nothing less than outright prohibition on trade and consumptive use of nature is acceptable.

Eugène Lapointe was the president of CITES during the 1980s, when the ivory trade ban was imposed. He now heads the [IWMC World Conservation Trust](#). In an e-mail interview, he writes: “The problem at CITES is that the organisation has steadily become more politicised, with many animal rights NGOs promoting the idea that a listing equates to saving a species, while a vote against a listing is denounced as condemning a species to extinction. This is complete nonsense. Unfortunately, most of the media that reports on wildlife issues sides with the NGOs.”

These groups exercise their influence through donations to developing countries, by politically shaming developed country delegations, and by threatening tourism consequences for countries that do not toe their line. Their goals are ideological and rooted in elitist philosophies that value animals at least as highly as the humans who have to live with them. And they profit handsomely from their intransigent positions: they have annual fundraising budgets in the millions – and sometimes hundreds of millions – of dollars.

Lapointe explains the dynamic: “The wealthiest forces at CITES, and therefore the most powerful, are the NGOs that thrive on promoting protectionism. I don’t think the supporters of these organisations have nefarious intentions – in fact, I am sure they want to help conserve wildlife – but they don’t understand how bans on legal trade can actually make things worse. It seems counterintuitive. On the other hand, the leaders of these NGOs can see that prohibitions don’t improve conservation but they are often so ideologically opposed to

the use of wildlife that they cannot countenance any way forward that would involve the death of an animal. So they demand more effective law enforcement without understanding its limitations. Ironically this all becomes self-sustaining because as poaching continues, the NGOs can continue to attract more and more donor money to 'save' a species."

He continues: "NGOs work behind the scenes to get member states to sponsor and support listings. The animal rights and animal welfare NGOs are based and financed in the USA and Europe, which is why these countries are so heavily involved in listing proposals. They cater to their own constituencies. It seems to me that many westerners are driven to support NGO agendas by a misplaced desire to feel better about themselves, by 'making the world a better place'."

That the doctrine of sustainable use has been abandoned can be seen in statements by several formal organisations. The international NGO monitoring wildlife trade, TRAFFIC, lists CITES itself among its donors. In direct contradiction to [its stated mission and vision](#), however, it opposes any form of trade in, or sustainable utilisation of, wildlife.

It states its mission "to ensure that trade in wild plants and animals is not a threat to the conservation of nature", which sounds fair enough. It expands upon that in its vision "of a world where wildlife trade is: managed in a way that maintains healthy wildlife populations and ecosystems; contributes to meeting human needs;

supports local and national economies; and helps motivate commitments to conserve wild species and habitats”.

Marvellous. That’s sustainable use and sustainable development, right there. The problem is that when it meets to discuss, for example, trade in rhino products, it [flatly contradicts this position](#): “Trade or sustainable utilisation of wildlife is inherently wrong and should never be countenanced.”

Clearly, TRAFFIC is no longer true to its founding mission, and has departed from the aims of the World Conservation Strategy of 1980. It is governed by a steering committee composed of members of its “partner organisations”, the WWF and the IUCN. All of them are sister organisations to CITES.

“A central aim of TRAFFIC’s activities is to contribute to the wildlife trade-related priorities of these partners,” it says. The IUCN is usually careful to qualify its discussion of trade in wildlife by referring to “illegal trade”, but it is not immune to the pressure to oppose all trade in wildlife. Among its 1,394 members from 170 countries, many strongly oppose the principle of sustainable utilisation. In 2014, it called upon the public to [“Stop Wildlife Trade, Celebrate World Wildlife Day”](#). As for the WWF, [even ecologists are sceptical of the data](#) in its reports designed to scare the public into donating more money.

Many ordinary Africans, rich and poor alike, depend on nature and the resources it offers for their living. If there is no reason to conserve wild game species, why would they? If they cannot trade wildlife products internationally, what is to stop them from shooting the game for meat, and

turning unproductive bush into productive livestock or crop farms?

If CITES has betrayed the doctrine of sustainable use, why should African countries continue to take orders from foreigners, when the animals that need protection are not theirs? Why should former colonial powers, having raided Africa's wildlife, now get a say in what Africans are and are not allowed to do in pursuit of sustainable development in a healthy and productive natural environment?

CITES, the treaty that was supposed to protect endangered wildlife, was signed more than 40 years ago, but has had very little actual success. [In a 1997 paper](#), environmental economist Michael t'Sas-Rolfes considered the cases of rhino, elephant, bears and tigers, to assess whether the treaty actually worked. He found that the listing of these species by CITES was for the most part unsuccessful, either in conserving the species or curbing trade in their products. After trade prohibitions, prices for products derived from the protected animals skyrocketed, illegal markets flourished, poaching became a serious problem requiring military-style intervention, the wishes of range states were overridden at CITES conferences, and the blanket trade rules ended up punishing countries with successful wildlife management programmes, such as South Africa.

CITES listings and trade prohibitions – encompassing about 35,000 species now – are extremely blunt weapons with which to attack the complex and varied problems of managing wildlife. This decades-long experiment has largely failed. As Brian Child wrote in the *South African*

Journal of Science, “No domestic species has gone extinct because it was valuable, so why is high value a threat to wild species, rather than an enormous opportunity?”

That is not to say there haven't been positive outcomes under CITES from which one may learn something. Environmentalists like to argue that a legal trade in products such as ivory and rhino horn can only stimulate demand and encourage poachers to launder illegal products through legal channels, but empirical evidence is against them. There are many case studies that prove the opposite: that legal trade and sustainable use can provide the incentives to conserve species and curb poaching.

The case of the South American [vicuña and its golden fleece](#) is an illustration of how private or community ownership of an economically productive species can bring it back from the edge of extinction. Another example is crocodiles. Although all crocodylian species are protected by CITES, the campaign around crocodylians has focused on establishing a legal and sustainable international trade, instead of a trade prohibition.

Crocodiles are today widely farmed and subject to controlled harvesting in the wild. Notably, the [IUCN Crocodile Specialist Group](#) found: “Despite predictions that legal trade would encourage illegal trade, an outstanding result of market-driven conservation of crocodylians is that illegal trade has all but been eradicated in the face of well regulated legal trade.”

Once-off ivory auctions likewise did not increase illegal trade, and in fact may have decreased it, [according to CITES itself](#). “Poaching levels appear to be more closely

related to governance problems and political instability in certain regions of the continent,” it says.

In countries where game populations have increased, like South Africa, this is highly correlated with the [rise of private wildlife ownership](#) and legal trade. More than two-thirds of the land and much of the wildlife under management in South Africa exists on private game ranches. This industry has significant conservation, economic and social benefits, according to [a study by the Endangered Wildlife Trust](#). By imbuing wildlife with economic value, their future is assured. By subjecting that value to private ownership, their sustainable use is assured.

A wonderful example of this principle in action is the [Bubye River Conservancy](#), in the heart of Zimbabwe. What was once the largest cattle ranching farm in the country has been turned into a sanctuary for wildlife, including all of the Big Five. Since few rich foreigners consider Zimbabwe an ecotourism destination, the conservancy runs entirely on the proceeds of hunting. Local communities, who benefit from regular supplies of game meat, have a vested interest in the success of the conservancy, and help form a bulwark against poachers. What was once a dusty, over-grazed wasteland is now a thriving wildlife conservation and research area, benefiting the environment, local landowners and surrounding communities.

Conversely, animals under the protection of CITES, such as elephants and rhinos, have become major targets for poachers, despite the assurance of international animal

rights groups that prohibiting consumptive use of wildlife and the resulting trade in its products would protect the species.

It is as if these people have never heard of the effect of prohibition. If you ban something, all you do is increase its value and drive the trade underground, to the criminal class, out of reach of the protection of the law. The prohibition of alcohol has failed. The prohibition on sex work has failed. The prohibition of drugs has failed. Worse, all these attempts at prohibition led to unintended consequences, ranging from damaging effects on economic activity, lower government tax revenues, increased risks to consumers, turning millions of otherwise law-abiding citizens into hardened prison inmates, and killing thousands of people in increasingly militarised law enforcement operations.

Nowhere is the failure of prohibition more evident than in Kenya, which has long been under the spell of animal rights groups. In 1977, it instituted a ban on sport hunting and all consumptive use of wildlife, and instituted a comprehensive wildlife monitoring programme. According to [a 2007 paper](#) published in the World Economics Journal by Mike Norton-Griffiths, an ecologist resident in Kenya, that country has lost between 60% and 70% of all its large wildlife in the decades since the ban. The reason, he argues, is the differential return on land dedicated to agriculture, livestock and wildlife.

The potential return on wildlife ranching in so-called “concession areas” is about \$10 per hectare per year, derived mostly from exclusive arrangements with tour

companies. This pales by comparison to livestock ranching, and especially agriculture, which brings in up to \$270/ha/y. Only in arid regions does the return on agriculture fall below the return on wildlife ownership.

Earlier this year, Kenya made headlines by burning a massive stockpile of ivory and rhino horn, worth an estimated \$180-million. This seems like an extremely expensive way to flip the bird to poaching syndicates, but it was not as irrational as it seems. In effect, the ivory and horn was bought for this purpose by NGOs such as the African Wildlife Foundation. Kenya certainly did not do this publicity stunt for nothing. In fact, it was being rather hypocritical.

Other groups, notably the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), have also been active in Kenya for decades. They routinely issue veiled threats about “tourism boycotts” should Kenya change the failed wildlife management policies they advocated in the first place. Meanwhile, and despite the so-called fight against poaching, the ruling Kenyatta family and other political elites [have been implicated](#) in large-scale wildlife slaughter and trade. It isn’t hard to imagine that despite the show of officially destroying its stockpiles, some of the valuable contraband ended up in the hands of well connected poaching syndicates. When legal markets are prohibited, or buried under mountains of red tape, as CITES does, this opens the door to cronyism, corruption and criminal poaching syndicates.

Unless other African countries want to go the way of Kenya, watching wildlife populations dwindle while

political elites enrich themselves and kowtow to the demands of western animal rights groups, they should act decisively.

Just as with the ban on ivory trade, African countries are not being heard at CITES. South Africa has already [abandoned its plan](#) to propose a legal, regulated market in rhino horn. There appears to be no rational reason for this turnaround in policy, other than influence by animal rights activists. Less than a week after this bombshell announcement, little Swaziland submitted [a last-minute proposal](#) to CITES to be permitted a limited and regulated trade in white rhino horn. It needs to convince two-thirds of the 182 parties to CITES. Although the handful of white rhino range states are likely to support this measure, Swaziland hasn't got a hope in hell.

In 2012, a Tanzanian proposal to downlist the African elephant and permit the sale of its ivory stockpile was rejected by CITES. The same will probably happen to this year's proposal by Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa to lift the ban on trade in ivory in favour of a De Beers-style monopoly. While this hardly amounts to a free market in ivory, there is no reason to believe that even such a limited proposal will attract the votes of a supermajority of CITES parties, the vast majority of whom have no elephant populations of their own to manage.

“I would like to think that the African countries could agree a way forward together, but I am not sure that would actually happen because there would still be a lot of outside interference from American and European interests (NGOs) that oppose sustainable use,” says

Lapointe. “Even if African nations within CITES all agreed tomorrow to allow a carefully managed trade in ivory, they wouldn't be able to outvote the Europeans. This situation is very frustrating for all those in Africa (and elsewhere) who know that sustainable use is the best way forward.”

For a fortnight starting on 23 September, the parties to CITES will hold their 17th bi-annual meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa. It is an appropriate location, given that many of the species controlled by CITES occur in Africa. It is also a perfect opportunity for African countries to stop pandering to foreign interests in their wildlife, and exercise their sovereign right to benefit from the sustainable utilisation of wildlife. If CITES will not let them do so, African countries should reject the neocolonialism of western animal rights groups and withdraw from the treaty. **DM**

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