

Opinion

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What CITES Means to You: Eugene Lapointe, Former CITES Secretary-General

Forty years ago, on March 3, 1973, a branch of the United Nations Environment Programme, CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora), was created with the aim to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival. Clearly there is a need to regulate the international trade in wildlife, for the black market in wildlife trafficking is second in value only to drugs, and equal to the firearms black market. To date, CITES listings involve more than 30,000 species of animals and plants.

Individual countries join CITES, some 180 at present, and they are called “Parties.” Parties agree to abide by decisions of CITES, but national laws also must be passed to enforce such agreements. They also have voting rights. Parties also contribute to funding CITES.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can participate in CITES activities as Observers. There are both national and international NGOs. They do not vote but they hold tremendous lobbying powers. No one understands that better than Eugene Lapointe, President of the IWMC World Conservation Trust, for reasons that I will explain in a moment. But first, CITES.

Hunting, harvesting, and hijacking

The 16th meeting of CITES was recently held in Bangkok, Thailand on March 3-14. Eugene was there and we spoke for nearly an hour about what had transpired. Now you may ask—why should I be concerned about CITES?

Eugene, who is the former Secretary-General of CITES, told me that when CITES was first created, its focus was on truly endangered species that hovered on the brink of extinction that might be harvested for pet shops, manufacturing of goods, or hunting trophies—Java rhino, Siberian tiger, simitar oryx, whooping crane, mountain gorilla, California condor, giant panda, leatherback sea turtle, and so on.

However, in recent years NGOs with anti-hunting perspectives have moved in and tried very hard to expand the focus of CITES to include species that they have launched campaigns to save but which may not be at all threatened with extinction. The term that Eugene used to describe this is “hijacked.” The NGOs have hijacked the decision-making process of CITES that normally belongs to governments by using different mechanisms, including passing “envelopes” to delegates for them to vote as the NGOs wish.

Some of the species, like the Southern Gastric-brooding Frog and some rare butterflies may not seem important. However, there has been a growing effort by some of the “green NGOs” to push for protection of species with large populations like harp seals, Bluefin tuna, and whales that are not in danger of extinction. In this last session, species proposed for various levels of protection included polar bear, white rhino, African elephant, five species of sharks, American ginseng, and several species of turtles.

“Environmentalism these days has become like cholesterol—it is good and bad. The ‘good’ environmentalism is needed to maintain a healthy planet. The ‘bad’ environmentalism can destroy life, habitats, and livelihoods,” Eugene said. “The good groups,” he continued, “seek protection and proper management of species for the benefit of humankind. The bad groups are completely protectionist and want little or no human impact on the species. I call them ‘bad’ because they fail to recognize sustainable harvest and management, which inspires local groups to practice conservation. They advocate programs that destroy indigenous people’s economies, such as the recent attempt to block polar bear hunting in Canada, which if it had passed (it did not) would have been devastating to Inuit communities and the polar bear population. The science on the future of polar bear is speculative, and the Inuit, who live with them, know their numbers are stable and capable of supporting hunting.”

When you come in and seek to block an existing sustainable harvest, you throw a monkey wrench into the economy. Not only does that impact the hunters and fishermen and their families, but it has a ripple effect that weakens the entire community structure. The result is that the only people left who do harvest these species are poachers.

Okay, now let’s return to Eugene Lapointe to explain how he became such an expert on this on the international trade in wildlife.

A family history of conservation

On November 4, 2009, Eugene Lapointe bagged his first deer: an 8-point whitetail buck taken on a farm within 45 minutes of Ottawa, Quebec. What makes this deer very special is that in 2009, Eugene turned 70.

“A good friend, who is a Canadian government official, owns a farm about 45 minutes’ drive from Ottawa,” Lapointe told me. “He convinced me to come deer hunting at his farm. In 2008 I saw many deer, but no legal bucks. In 2009, on my last day of hunting, about five minutes before sunset an 8-pointer walked out of the woods and I got him with one shot.”

The buck may have been Eugene’s first deer, but the buck was hardly his first wild game bagged that year. Prior to the buck, on October 21, he killed a large cow moose, the sixth moose that he has taken in the last decade, and Eugene has been hunting for seven decades. Since 2009, he has bagged a deer every hunting season.

Eugene was first exposed to hunting when he was nine months old, his family moved to a Canadian national park where his father was stationed as a game warden and fire lookout in an extremely remote area. They were the only people in residence for miles. At the age of four, dad got a promotion and they moved to the park's entrance. By age seven, Eugene was helping put food on the table, snaring hares and grouse and catching trout. "When I was growing up in Quebec, there were no deer, so we hunted small game, bears, and trapped beavers and other fur-bearing animals. That's why my 2009 deer was my first."

"I got my first lessons in sustainability and conservation there," he says. "If a small river did not produce enough fish, we knew to leave it alone and fish the lake until more fish came back into the stream. When the grouse and hares went down in one area, I put snares out in another, so the populations could rebound."

The Lapointe family was resourceful. Not only did an annual bear provide meat, but, "We would take the fat from bears father killed and rendered it down to make soap," Lapointe says. They made their own medicines as well. Beaver kidneys were used as a curative for almost any illness. "The taste of the beaver kidneys was so yucky that once you tasted it, it became a preventive medicine, as you never wanted to be sick again," Lapointe added.

His mother was a former schoolteacher. There was no school nearby, so his mother taught the family about one hour per day 365 days of the year. He did not attend formal school until age 12, but he still considers nature and his parents as having taught him more about ecology and conservation than any class he ever has taken. His early experiences have also given him special understanding of how indigenous peoples depend on nature to survive; something which has enabled him to rise to international recognition in conservation of natural resources.

Ultimately, Eugene went to college and then law school. For 14 years he served in the Canadian government in international programs, which included CITES. During that time Eugene managed to get out every year to fish and hunt small game, waterfowl, and moose.

An unsustainable judgment

In 1982, he was appointed Secretary-General of CITES, which meant relocating to Switzerland. When he went to work for CITES, he brought with him what he had learned from growing up in the woods of Quebec. This position, however, made him a target, when his perspectives on sustainable use differed with those from some environmental activists.

Lapointe left his post at CITES dramatically on November 2, 1990, when he was dismissed by UNEP Executive Director Mostapha Tolba. The campaign to remove him was led by a handful of U.S. officials and 28 major NGOs, who, according to Lapointe, "claimed I had become the worst criminal on the planet, responsible for wiping out entire populations of African elephants." His crime was advocating a sustainable use philosophy that allowed for scientifically directed hunting of whales, elephants, and other animals, especially in situations that respect local cultural values and generate economic activities.

Thirty months later, a panel of judges of the United Nations described Lapointe's dismissal as "capricious and arbitrary," resulting from "... the worst case of character assassination in the history of the United Nations." In a unanimous decision, the judges vindicated Lapointe, awarded him financial compensation, ordered his reinstatement, and forced the UN Secretary General to write a letter stating "Mr. Lapointe had fulfilled his duties and responsibilities in every way and in a highly satisfactory manner."

This whole story is laid out by Lapointe in his book, *Embracing The World's Resources: A Global Conservation* (Sherbrooke, Quebec: Editions du Scribe, 2003) that should be required reading for every student studying conservation and ecology, everyone concerned about the future of sustainable use and every decision-maker trying to fashion sustainable resource-use policy.

In 167 passionate pages, Lapointe lays out a pragmatic philosophy of sustainable use and presents considerable data on the state of many wild animals that seldom appears in the media. His defense clearly shows why poverty is the biggest force working against conservation and how poverty is exploited and abused by extreme environmentalists.

Lapointe targets the extremist NGOs whose real "green quest" is the pursuit of the greenback dollar. According to Lapointe, eco/animal rights NGOs, such as the Species Survival Network, a coalition of over 60 NGOs who claim to be "committed to the promotion, enhancement, and strict enforcement of CITES," may be more of a threat to wildlife than a supportive resource, as they perpetuate so many falsehoods.

After being exonerated, Lapointe felt that he could do more good for wildlife outside of CITES, so he founded IWMC World Conservation Trust, a global coalition of experts and wildlife managers promoting sustainable resource use guided by science that has offices around the world. His combination of formal and informal training gives him unique credentials to draw upon for such work that makes him one of the most influential people in the world on international wildlife trade.

He spends considerable time each year traveling around the globe, seeking to support and establish policies of sustainable use of resources that permit hunting, fishing, and other sustainable activities as conservation mechanisms. So much time is spent traveling that he confesses that he has had some years when he did not return to Quebec to renew his roots in the hunt. In Switzerland, where IWMC is based, he has enjoyed tagging along but he was never there long enough to complete the lengthy classes necessary to get a hunting license. About 10 years ago he decided that had to change. Since then he has made his annual fall pilgrimage to Quebec. He considers it a time of "spiritual renewal," as well as getting some organic meat for the table.

The battles that he currently is focusing on are CITES' "uncontrolled, unwarranted, and ineffective listings" that he feels impede wise sustainable use: getting people to see that harvesting elephants in Africa is important to wildlife conservation and local economic health;

insuring that polar bears taken legally by hunters should not be banned from importation into the U.S.; and establishing sound management of the bluefin tuna trade before it is ruined.

Protecting the livelihoods of people depending on the harvesting of wild resources is his top priority. "If we destroy livelihood for the sake of environmentalist considerations, we annihilate conservation efforts. It is a simple mathematic equation."

Eugene is a conservationist who truly does walk his talk. When I first called, Helene, his wife, said I would have to wait as Eugene was deep sea fishing. When I did catch up with him a couple days later I asked how he had done. He replied with a chuckle that his family had enjoyed some wonderful grouper the night before.

Eugene Lapointe is the President of IWMC World Conservation Trust Foundation and former CITES Secretary-General.