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Is CITES Failing Humanity?

By Eugene Lapointe

Two meetings of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) will always be memorable to me because of the lessons they taught every delegate and participant – and, like CoP 17, they both took place in Southern Africa.

The first was the fourth meeting of the Conference of the Parties held in Gaborone, Botswana in 1983. It was my first after having been appointed Secretary General of CITES and I was filled with energy and hope for the vision I had for my new role – overseeing international agreements for the sustainable utilisation of terrestrial and marine wildlife resources, in a way that never threatens their survival and is always human-centered.

Most of our meetings took place outdoors. The plenary sessions were in a tent and outside of those, we gathered under trees. “Where must we go?” delegates would ask me and I would point towards whichever tree had been designated for that particular meeting. In this environment, and through easily accessible visits to rural communities, it wasn’t hard for delegates to experience that truly wondrous relationship between nature and humans that makes life on earth such a joy.

CoP10 which took place in Harare, Zimbabwe in 1997. By then I had left CITES and founded the International Wildlife Management Consortium (IWMC) World Conservation Trust to promote sustainable use as the only truly realistic conservation mechanism.

Once again, the CoP didn’t take place in isolation from the very stuff of its deliberations. Zimbabwe’s Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE) took an active role in the conference, and worked hard to show delegates a working model of conservation that was rooted in rural development and the sustainable use of resources. Having witnessed the power of this model firsthand, it wasn’t a surprise to me when the parties to CoP10 voted to allow Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe to sell from their existing legal stocks of raw ivory to pre-approved traders, with the funds going to elephant conservation activities.

What CoP4 and CoP10 so powerfully demonstrated is that there is no more convincing argument for the direction that CITES must follow, than humans themselves.

I also remember how the voice of a single Inuit observer was decisive in defeating an ill-considered proposal by Germany to transfer the Narwhal from Appendix II to Appendix I a few years ago. The proposal was to enforce a total prohibition on international trade of this marine mammal. Inuit hunt Narwhal for food and turn the male long tusk into a beautiful carving they can sell to tourists. Because he was there, the conference was able to hear the negative impact that this decision would have, not only on the livelihood of Inuit, but also on the population of the Narwhal. Simply and eloquently, the observer explained how disrupting the traditional practice of hunting males for their tusks and meat would actually result in many more females being hunted because Narwhal meat is needed for human survival and the yield of females is much smaller than that of males. A voice coming directly from the affected community killed the proposal in its tracks.

It was the same when the Canadian government brought representatives of small communities to CoP16 in Bangkok to talk about the dire consequences that a total ban on international trade in polar bears would have on their livelihood, culture and tradition. Again, the local communities were able to prevail.

Yet despite these successes, it appears to me that the direction that CITES is going in is one where the human rights charter has been burnt in favour of an animal rights and poachers charter. If that sounds harsh it's because I increasingly fail to see how proposals and decisions at the CoPs truly place communities that are sustainably using wildlife on an equal footing with the agendas of the "Eco-Colonialists", or even distinguish these communities from those involved in the crime of poaching.

As CoP17 unfolded this past week, I hoped for greater understanding from the wealthy countries towards the smaller ones whose citizens face death from starvation and who might have to prioritise humanistic national goals above all.

It is deeply disturbing that certain countries raised the idea, during the Resolution on Livelihood and Food Security, that the issue of livelihood falls *outside* of CITES' scope. How can wealthy countries even contemplate this? Quite correctly the chair suggested that a small drafting group be created to take the resolution further, but it was starkly revealing of a near complete refusal of certain countries to walk towards a greater understanding. I still hold out hope that there will be a recognition in principle by CITES of the vital importance of livelihood and food security in all the organisation's work.

Every decision taken at the CoPs and every agreement that forms part of CITES, must be measured against the five strategic objectives of the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FOA) – most importantly the objectives of helping eliminate hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition and reducing rural poverty. There must be a balance in the triangle of culture and

traditions; human development; and conservation and the environment.

The truth is that each corner of this triangle must give a little to the others. You cannot have full scale conservation without regard to culture, tradition and development and the same applies in the other two configurations.

It was heartbreaking when, on the first day of CoP17, Madagascar made a sincere plea for more time to get national legislation in place to support the implementation of CITES agreements. One of the poorest countries in the world was asking for consideration for its national priority of alleviating hunger and poverty, but was abruptly told that it cannot act with impunity.

I consider myself fortunate to have grown up in harmony with nature and having travelled to around 130 countries in the world. I'm privileged to have seen and heard for myself the role that the sustainable use of wildlife plays in communities all over the globe.

Nonetheless, the more I travel, the less I understand about how to achieve unity and cooperation. When misery makes itself apparent to me in the countries I visit, I am aware there is very little I can do to alleviate it whilst the countries of the world are focused on animal rights, and not human rights.

Perhaps CITES would do better if it reverted to meeting in tents and under trees, without the intrusion of WiFi and all the conveniences of modern technology.