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Ex secretary-general of CITES calls for conservationists to support sustainable use of wildlife

Posted on 14 September, 2016 by [Africa Geographic Editorial](#) in [Conservation](#), [Events](#), [Wildlife](#) — 7 Comments

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Written by: *Eugene Lapointe, President of the International Wildlife Management Consortium (IWMC) World Conservation Trust*

South Africa will soon play host to CoP17 – the 17th meeting of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. The fact that CITES' 12-day global gathering is being held in the Southern African region is the best opportunity yet for the wider conservation community to free itself from the eco-colonialism that has taken hold of it, and embrace conservation rooted in the sustainable use of wildlife.



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During my eight years as secretary-general of CITES and, since then, as president of the International Wildlife Management Consortium (IWMC), I have never wavered in my belief that it is only viable management programmes of all the world's wildlife and marine resources that can bring true conservation. I am also convinced

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– one that I experienced as a child growing up in the Canadian wilds where I hunted and fished for food for our family.

Ours is not the prevailing or even the popular view. So extensive has been the eco-colonialists' capture of the conservation community, and so deep are their pockets and extensive their access to the media, that you seldom hear a different viewpoint in the mainstream media. Like the arrogant and paternalistic imperialists of the past, eco-colonialists believe that the environmental strictures that they have mapped out are morally superior to any other approaches. Much like their religious and economic counterparts of a few hundred years ago, this excessive form of environmentalism will not hesitate to demand that national governments and international bodies support their viewpoint – or punish those countries or organisations stepping out of line.

This is precisely what happened with Zimbabwe's Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE), which incorporates managed hunting as a way of generating economic benefits for local communities. In particular, through CAMPFIRE, sport hunters from the USA play a significant role in establishing a balance between local communities and elephants. This brings in much-needed income and encourages communities to regard the species as worthy of sustainable use – to be, therefore, respected and conserved. However, since the 2014 suspension of elephant imports by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) – after a misleading campaign in the American media – CAMPFIRE's revenue has dropped, putting the future of this important, community-based conservation programme at real risk.

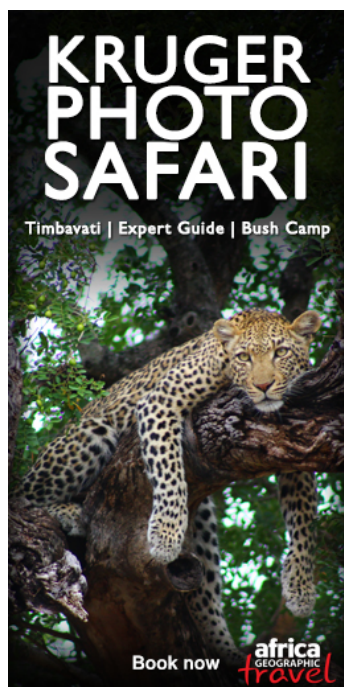
As CoP17 approaches, the Zimbabwean example is particularly pertinent because it is an example of how the animal rights communities of the global North use their muscle to get the global South into line when it comes to wildlife trade. But the intersection between livelihood and food security, and conservation is crucially important in Southern Africa and the many other countries in the world where the 870-million people officially designated as hungry today live.

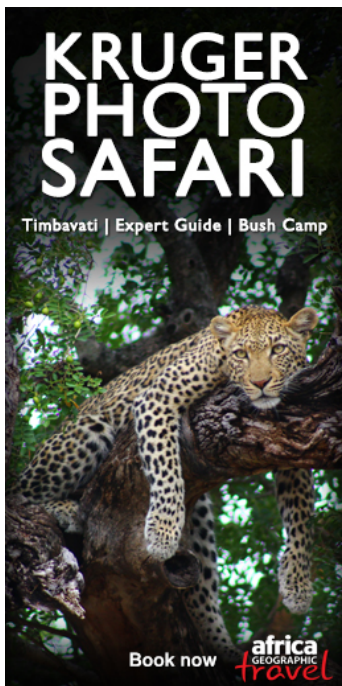
It is for this reason that I am hoping that CoP17 supports the draft resolution on livelihoods and food security that has been prepared by Namibia, Cote d'Ivoire and Antigua and Barbuda – one of many proposals to be considered at CITES. The proposal has been prepared in line with the strategic vision of the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and urges CoP17 to “take into account the need for *inter alia*, food and nutrition security, preservation of cultural identity and security of livelihoods when making proposed amendments to the Appendices”. Supporting this proposal will demonstrate that CITES understands that poverty is the biggest enemy of conservation and, we hope, will open eyes to the relationship between food security and conservation.

The appendices – lists of species afforded different levels or types of trade control – are, in many ways, the most important element of CITES. In theory at least, Appendix I lists species that are threatened with extinction and permits trade only in exceptional circumstances, Appendix II lists species that are not necessarily now threatened with extinction but that may become so unless trade is closely controlled, and Appendix III is a list of species included at the request of a party that already protects a species and needs the cooperation of other countries to control trade.

IWMC believes that CoP17 affords CITES with the opportunity to support a proposal by Namibia and Zimbabwe to amend the annotation to the listing of the African elephant in Appendix II in such a way that they would be entitled to trade in ivory in accordance with the provisions of the convention relating to the trade in Appendix-II specimens. Our reasoning for this is sound. Indeed in 2007 we predicted, in a press release issued on 14th June 2016, that the agreement made at CITES CoP14 in The Hague, to suspend trade in ivory for nine years, would undermine elephant conservation. We take no pleasure in being proved right here but it is our view that this moratorium is driving an increase in elephant poaching and illegal ivory trade. Like just about all prohibition-based initiatives in history, CITES' much-lauded prohibition policy has, therefore, failed its conservation objectives of the African elephant. It has also restricted the development of human populations in the range states advocating a well-managed and controlled trade, as a tool to conserve their elephant populations.

The main successes of CITES that are usually referred to relate to species that were transferred from Appendix I to Appendix II, or maintained in the latter, to allow trade in their specimens. These include crocodilians, the vicuña and the queen conch. Why not apply the same philosophy to the African elephant as well, which is producing ivory, a very valuable resource when used properly instead of being destroyed?





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By doing this, CITES will demonstrate that it is able to listen to those countries – many of them in Southern Africa – that have a deeper understanding of the unbreakable relationship between humans and wild species. It is people from those communities – individuals who share their living habitat with other creatures – who have the traditional scientific knowledge needed for creating programmes devoted to the sustainable use of wildlife, not the “laptop environmentalists” in London, Washington and Paris.

We live in a time of sweeping statements, arguments with little or no nuance and a desire for ordinary people to “do good” in ways that don’t challenge their comfort zones. In this context it is difficult to compete with the loud, populist view that all wildlife trade should be banned. This argument taps into a well of human emotions – and also into a clutch of celebrities looking for a cause. Celebrities are the worst disease in conservation. What good is a success story like the vicuña of South America (where an endangered animal is now thriving together with legal trade in the animal’s fibre) when you have celebrities making big statements about banning all trade in wildlife? Celebrities should stick to humanitarian issues where they can make a difference, and stay out of conservation.

I would urge all South Africans, both ordinary folk and members of the conservation community, to be aware of the wolf as we head into CoP17. Be wary of those who style themselves as saviours of the planet, raising huge amounts of funding for their organisations in the process. Give celebrities who support them a wide berth. Instead, welcome the best of us in the conservation community who ask you to share your knowledge and work with us to establish programmes that benefit humans and wildlife. Most of all, make your stories known. Be brave enough to stand up and go against the prevailing view if you believe the sustainable use of wildlife will benefit your community. Both human and wildlife have rights and the time to re-establish the proper balance between the two has come.

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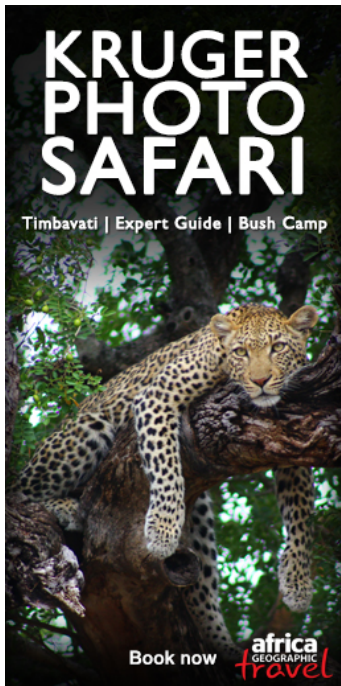
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Chaminuka • 5 days ago

David I agree with you. Fundamentally we lost it as Africans when we watched as they introduced market norms into conservation in our communities that had long lived in harmony with wildlife because of long held social norms in many of our African countries. Now because they can't control this monster they go about instructing us to stop wildlife trade.

This CoP thing is a joke, we know the most critical threat to wildlife in particular elephants is loss of habitat. Poaching is a problem but it won't be stopped by banning hunting. Why is it that the very countries that said no to hunting continue to see a decline in wildlife populations with exceptions of TZ who basically need to sort out their system. Some countries make a lot of noise about hunting (in any case they always dance to other people's tune, those who hold the cash) but they are silently degazetting protected areas in favor of ill planned infrastructural projects. Hear me - if we manage to stop elephant poaching today, and return to this 600 000+ continental heard we dream of, do we have the space to sustain it. It is the very programs like CAMPFIRE that will ensure we have this space.

For CoP17 to succeed I would say members countries should have a closed door conference, shut out these conservation NGOs who say positions without substance or real solutions. You Africans should show pride in ownership of their wildlife, I say give us the space to make decisions about our wildlife and whatever decision we make support that - then we will know this wildlife is ours after all.

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Alan Smith • 9 days ago

I hesitate to comment as I am in the group labeled eco-colonialist - a convenient way to dismiss the majority of your critics. Twenty-seven African countries oppose this proposal, compared with the 3 that are in favour (are they eco-colonialist too or is the eco-colonialist the Canadian author of this article?). This article, like many (on both sides of the argument) is long on rhetoric and short on evidence. I would welcome the opinions of anyone who can provide the evidence, rather than the belief, that sustainable trade is the way forward.

There have been a couple of sales of ivory permitted by CITES in the recent past, which have resulted (a couple of years down the line) in an increase in poaching of elephants (see the data on the CITES website). Given that sustainable use of wildlife is, at best, unproven, it makes sense to take action to close down the legal markets that provide a smokescreen for the illegal markets to hide behind.

The arguments in favour of limited trade are financial and human-centred. It is time to look at the eco-system as a whole and not make the short-term welfare of our own species the primary objective of our decisions. In the long-term we will suffer too and, by then, it will be too late to save many of Africa's iconic species.

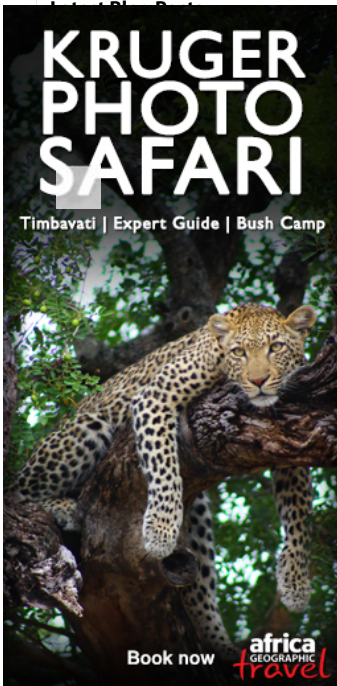
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1Zoo1 → Alan Smith • 7 days ago

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