

CITES 101

Understanding Appendices, CoPs and Permits

Until the early 1960s, trade in wild animals and plants focused on consumer demand with little regard for its impact on the long-term survival of species. But, as international discussions turned to this unregulated trade and the threat it posed to wildlife, CITES was born.

In 1963, a resolution adopted at a meeting of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in Nairobi, Kenya, led to the drafting of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Ten years later, the text of the Convention was approved in Washington, DC, at a meeting of representatives from 80 countries. On July 1, 1975, CITES took effect.

Today, the 177 member nations of CITES (called Parties) work together to protect almost 35,000 species of plants and animals by ensuring that international trade is legal and does not threaten their survival in the wild.

How CITES Protects Species

International trade in plants and animals, whether taken from the wild or bred in captivity, can pose serious risks to wildlife species. Without regulation, international trade can deplete wild populations, leading to extinction. The goal of CITES is to facilitate legal, biologically sustainable trade, whenever possible. But, in some cases, no level of commercial trade can be supported.

Species are listed in one of three appendices:

- Appendix I comprises species threatened with extinction and provides the greatest level of protection. International trade for primarily commercial purposes is essentially prohibited. Examples include gorillas, sea turtles and giant pandas.

- Appendix II is composed of species that, although currently not threatened with extinction, may become so without trade controls. Most CITES species are listed in this appendix, including American ginseng, paddlefish, lions and many corals.

- Appendix III comprises species for which a range country, based on their own legal protections for a species, has asked other Parties to help control international trade. Examples include map turtles, walrus and Cape stag beetles.

The CITES Structure

CITES is administered by a Secretariat, located in Geneva, Switzerland. Three permanent committees (Standing, Animals and Plants) provide technical and scientific support to the Parties. Each Party designates Management and Scientific Authorities to issue permits, make legal and scientific findings, and monitor trade. In the United States, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's International Affairs Program carries out these functions.

The CITES Parties, collectively referred to as the Conference of the Parties (CoP), meet approximately every three years to review CITES implementation and assess the status of species in trade. During this meeting, Parties review and vote on proposals to improve the effectiveness of the treaty and make amendments to Appendices I and II. Through the adoption of resolutions and species proposals, the CoP develops practical solutions to complex wildlife trade problems. Attendees include Party delegations, representatives of the CITES



Bobcat skins with U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service CITES tags.

Secretariat and approved observers, including conservation and industry organizations.

Permits: More Than Paperwork

The backbone of CITES is the permit system that facilitates international cooperation in conservation and trade monitoring of CITES-listed species. Permits are issued only if a country's Management and Scientific Authorities determine that trade is legal and does not threaten the species' survival. The use of standardized permit forms allows officials at points of export and import to verify that specimens are properly documented. They also allow for collection of species-specific trade data to determine trends in trade, identifying increases or decreases in trade levels that may indicate a need to reassess a species listing in the CITES Appendices.

Over the last several decades, CITES has helped ensure the global conservation of species. Increased commitment by Parties to effectively implement the treaty, including stronger legislation and enforcement at the national level, has helped control worldwide over-exploitation of wildlife.

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