

News Release

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Global Protections Achieved for Imperiled Reptiles

(Johannesburg, South Africa) -Tortoises and freshwater turtles are the most threatened of any major group of terrestrial vertebrates – more so than mammals, birds or amphibians. They are increasingly at risk from poaching and commerce, which makes today’s decision to restrict global trade in six African and Middle Eastern softshell turtle species particularly significant. Signatory nations to the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), referred to as “parties,” are meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa, where they adopted by consensus a proposal, co-sponsored by the United States, to list these six species on Appendix II of the treaty.

“While freshwater turtles may not be the most iconic or charismatic species discussed at this CoP, they are certainly among the most heavily traded and deserving of CITES protections,” said U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Dan Ashe, head of the U.S. delegation to the treaty’s 17th Conference of the Parties (CoP17) in Johannesburg. “Today’s actions bring the majority of the world’s softshell turtles under the umbrella of CITES and we’re proud to work with a coalition of countries committed to reversing the trend of overexploitation that has depleted wild turtle populations.”

The United States co-sponsored a proposal to list the six softshell turtle species in Appendix II, which was submitted by Burkina Faso, Chad, Gabon, Guinea, Liberia, Mauritania, Nigeria, and Togo. The Appendix II listings were adopted by consensus. In 2013, the United States collaborated with international partners to adopt CITES protections for Asian freshwater turtles and in 2016 protected four of its native freshwater turtles under CITES Appendix III, bringing all North American softshell turtles under CITES protection.

Freshwater turtles and tortoises are collected, traded and utilized in overwhelming numbers principally to fill demand from Asia where they are prized for food and in traditional medicine. A growing pet trade also impacts a number of these threatened species. The global commerce in turtles in the last 20-plus years has followed a well-known pattern in international wildlife trade: once a species is depleted or regulated, the trade shifts to other

species that are not as threatened or are less regulated. With continued human-driven development and population growth, turtle populations around the world also face pressure from habitat degradation and loss.

Yesterday, the parties also recommended the Appendix II listing of twenty-one species of African pygmy chameleons, small insect-eating lizards native to the wet forests of central and eastern Africa that are popular pets in Europe and the United States. The United States co-sponsored the proposal, submitted by Central African Republic, Chad, Gabon, Kenya, and Nigeria. The listings, which were adopted by consensus of the parties, will require traders to obtain a permit before shipping them overseas, helping member countries better control trade to ensure it is legal.

The decisions could be reconsidered later this week, when the parties hold a decision-making session to finalize recommendations. According to Ashe, “These Appendix II listings will close a gap in global protections for softshell turtles and ensure that trade in African pygmy chameleons is legal and sustainable. Science supports these listings and we are confident the CITES parties will uphold these decisions.”

CoP17 is taking place from Sept. 24 through Oct. 5, 2016. CITES is an international agreement initiated in 1973 and since ratified by 182 countries and the European Union to protect certain wild animals and plants against over-exploitation as a result of international trade. More than 35,000 species of animals and plants benefit from CITES protection. Every two to three years, a session of the CoP is held to review, discuss and decide on changes in the implementation of CITES, including changes in protections for certain species.

Species protected by CITES fall under one of three appendices. Appendix I includes species threatened with extinction and provides the greatest level of protection, including restrictions on commercial trade. Appendix II includes species that, although currently not threatened with extinction, may become so without trade controls. Changes to Appendices I and II must be proposed at a CoP and agreed to by a two-thirds majority of the parties present and voting. In contrast, listings to Appendix III can be requested by individual parties at any time. Appendix III includes species protected by at least one country that needs assistance from other parties to control trade.

To learn more about the Service’s involvement in CITES, visit: <https://www.fws.gov/international/cites/cop17>.

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