

Wildlife in the Jewelry Trade

While habitat loss and degradation constitute the major threat to the continued existence of many species worldwide, human uses of wildlife – uses that include making products from animal parts – are also a conservation concern.

Early U.S. wildlife laws recognized the need to regulate the take and sale of native species, including some that were of commercial interest for ornamentation.

The Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, for example, helped stem market hunting of wild ducks and other waterfowl species — birds that were being shot and sold in large numbers to milliners in New York, Chicago, and other cities.

Today, an international treaty – the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) – helps countries worldwide protect species that are already at risk and ensure that wildlife trade (including trade in wildlife jewelry) is sustainable by regulating the importation and exportation of items made from species protected under this treaty.

Some wildlife jewelry imports and exports require permits under CITES. Other items – such as those made from migratory birds, marine mammals, and species listed as endangered or threatened under the U.S. Endangered Species Act – are prohibited.

Import/export regulations enforced by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service govern the wildlife jewelry trade in this country. Service inspectors must examine and clear wildlife jewelry shipments whether or not the species involved requires permits.

Retailers that buy wildlife materials that have been imported into the United States may want to ask vendors to provide copies of the clearance paperwork and any permits so they can assure potential customers that their products come from legal sources.

CITES, Wildlife, & Trade

CITES regulates trade in thousands of animal and plant species using a system of permits. Species that already face the threat of extinction are protected under Appendix I of the treaty. Both the exporting and importing country must issue permits for trade of such species, and commercial trade is generally banned.

Wildlife listed on Appendix II of the treaty can be traded commercially with a permit from the country of origin or re-export. This permit confirms that trade will not jeopardize the continued survival of the species.

A survey of Service records documenting wildlife imports and exports over the past several years shows that an array of species are in trade as jewelry – both legally and illegally. These commodities range from fine jewelry to costume jewelry imported in huge quantities for sale at big box stores to smuggled contraband such as sea turtle products and elephant ivory.

Species of Concern

The harvest and sale of wildlife for jewelry is a potential threat to a number of species. Some of these animals, such as sea turtles, are already in danger of extinction. Others, including many of the world's coral species, have experienced population declines. Continued harvest and use require careful management and regulated trade under the CITES treaty.

Sea Turtles

Harvest of sea turtles for skins and shells has helped drive six of the world's seven sea turtle species to the brink of extinction. Banned from global trade under CITES, sea turtles are also protected under the U.S. Endangered Species Act (which prohibits take and interstate sale as well as trade).

Queen Conch

Queen conch pearls have grown in popularity in recent times. Although a number of countries allow both subsistence and commercial harvest of

this marine mollusk, the species is listed on CITES Appendix II and trade from some countries is banned. Importers in the United States must make sure that shipments are legal to import and have CITES permits from the country of origin or re-export.

Other Contraband Jewelry

U.S. laws that protect elephants, migratory birds, marine mammals, and endangered or threatened species prohibit the sale, import, or export of these animals and products made from them.

For example, wild ducks, geese, and other waterfowl cannot be sold in the jewelry/ornamental trade in this country. If you see songbird feather items, someone has violated the Migratory Bird Treaty Act – a law that protects more than 1,000 species and their eggs and nests.

Whale bone or teeth items cannot be legally imported or sold in the United States since whales are among the species covered by the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

Elephant ivory imports and exports are restricted to antiques that meet specific criteria defined in the Endangered Species Act. Age of the item (over 100 years old) is only one factor.

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February 2013

