

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES): An Introduction

What is CITES?

CITES is an international environmental agreement, or treaty, between 171 nations to ensure the global wildlife trade is managed responsibly and sustainably. Trade in wildlife products is estimated to be worth billions of dollars every year (roughly \$160 billion in the 1990s). CITES' purpose is to ensure international trade does not threaten species' survival. Trade in wildlife products is diverse and includes jewelry, curios, food, medicine, leather goods and musical instruments. CITES was formally accepted in 1973 by 80 member nations (or Parties) and entered into force in 1975. Other well-known environmental agreements are the Kyoto Protocol and Montreal Protocol.

What species are protected under CITES?

Over 5,000 species of animals and 25,000 species of plants are protected under CITES, including elephants, great apes, tigers, great white sharks, certain whale species, coral, sturgeon, mahogany, and many others.

How does CITES work?

CITES operates by controlling the international trade in various wildlife products via a system of import and export permits. There are three Appendixes (or levels) within CITES where species are listed, depending on the trade control required.

- Appendix I – the most restrictive; species are threatened with extinction and international commercial trade is banned and permitted only in exceptional circumstances.
- Appendix II species - requires countries to adhere to a system of exports permits allowing trade in the product to be strictly monitored and controlled. This is the most common listing and over 32,000 plants and animals are found in Appendix II.
- Appendix III species - the least restrictive and includes species that are already protected domestically in a country. The country has asked other member nations of CITES for assistance to prevent exploitation of the species.

CITES is a voluntary “non-binding” agreement and is designed to provide a framework for member nations. Each country must adopt domestic legislation to ensure CITES' requirements are implemented.

What is the Conference of Parties, or CoP?

The CoP is the triennial meeting of CITES. Member countries meet to vote on the inclusion of new species under CITES, and consider upgrading or downgrading species within the Appendixes. Countries will also consider proposals that change the text (within CITES, called resolutions) that governs the trade of listed species.

Why is SeaWeb attending this year's CoP?

SeaWeb has two campaigns that focus on species either currently listed under CITES or that are being considered for a listing. Too Precious to Wear is a campaign to protect endangered pink and red corals, the most valuable and intensely traded of all deep sea corals, which are under threat due to destructive harvest methods, pollution and high demand for coral products. The United States has authored a proposal to list red and pink coral under Appendix II and SeaWeb will attend the 14th Conference of Parties to ensure the proposal is passed. Too Precious to Wear is also working to create a demand for coral conservation by raising awareness of this issue among the fashion and jewelry industries. For more information visit www.tooprecioustowear.org

SeaWeb's caviar campaigns, Caviar Emptor and L'Autre Caviar ("The Other Caviar") are asking CITES to increase trade protection for endangered wild sturgeon, source of black caviar. Sturgeon populations in the Caspian Sea have plummeted over the past two decades, and despite being listed under CITES since 1998, these "fossil" fish are in danger of being wiped out due to global demand for caviar, overfishing, poaching and habitat loss. SeaWeb will press for the member nations of CITES to take immediate action for sturgeon conservation, in the hopes that these ancient fish can survive. For more information visit www.caviarempor.org or www.seaweb.org/fr