

## Cites - what's at stake?



Fragments of the precious Mediterranean red coral, one of many species proposed for inclusion in Appendix II of Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (Cites) to restrict its international trade.

The world's gaze is currently set on Qatar for the 15th conference of parties (CoP) of Cites, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, which runs till Thursday.

During CoPs, which are normally held every two or three years, plant and animal species are proposed for inclusion in or removal from the appendices of Cites.

The customary horse-play between parties during these meetings will ultimately decide the fate of a number of species, including the polar bear, the African elephant, the grey wolf, the Nile crocodile, the tree frog, a number of shark species and, of special relevance to Malta, the Atlantic bluefin tuna, and pink and red coral species.

While the ongoing meeting certainly does not enjoy the same stature as the Copenhagen climate change talks, the lack of media and public attention on such a crucial meeting exposes the low priority this country attaches to biodiversity issues and the crisis we are facing.

As the name implies, the convention seeks to stave off internal trade in animal and plant species deemed vulnerable to extinction. Since it came in force in 1975 it is now ranked as one of the oldest international conventions, and with 175 current contracting parties, one with the highest affiliation. The latter statistic is especially significant when one considers that adherence by states to Cites is voluntary.

Cites affords varying degrees of protection to about 5,000 animal and 28,000 plant species. Since the ratification of Cites, just one species, the Spix's Macaw, has become extinct as a result of international trade, thus underscoring the effectiveness of the convention in attaining its goals.

Protection under Cites is three-tiered: Appendix I includes about 800 species in imminent danger of extinction, such as all large cats, the red panda, gorillas and chimpanzees, and most species of rhinoceros. Appendix II includes about 32,000 species which, though not necessarily threatened with extinction, may become so unless trade in these species are strictly regulated, such as the American black bear, African grey parrot, green iguana and bigleaf mahogany.

Appendix III lists about 170 species that are not necessarily threatened with global extinction but have been listed after a Cites member country has asked other parties to the convention to assist it in controlling trade in a species, such as the African civet, alligator snapping turtle.

Captive bred animals or cultivated plants of Appendix I species are considered Appendix II specimens, whose international trade is then permitted through the issuing of a relevant export permit or re-export certification.

The following are details of a few proposed changes in the designation of a number of species:

### **African elephant**

The proposed changes for this species are perhaps the ones that are making conservationists' hackles rise the most. Zambia and Tanzania are proposing that this species be transferred from Appendix I to Appendix II.

The sole purpose of this proposal is to permit trophy hunting for non-commercial purposes, and allow trade in raw hides and in a massive stash of ivory stocks estimated at 115 tons that has been impounded by these countries' governments.

Considering the countries' claim that all proceeds from the sale of the ivory stocks will go exclusively to elephant conservation, one would be tempted to consider the proposal as legitimate. However, one must bear in mind that during the last CoP meeting at The Hague in 2007, parties had agreed to introduce a nine-year moratorium in the trade of ivory after acceding to a sale of over 100 tons of ivory to China and Japan.

The African Elephant Coalition is voicing vociferous concern over the proposed downlisting of the iconic African elephant, the population of which has been decimated by the ivory trade in the 1970s and 1980s.

## **Atlantic bluefin tuna**

According to a recently-released study, the aquaculture industry rakes in over €100 million. But despite its size, the industry is almost entirely reliant on the farming of just one species - Atlantic bluefin tuna - which has been caught in the Mediterranean since Greek times.

The tiny principality of Monaco has proposed including the species in Appendix I of Cites, which would effectively cut off the supply of the fish species to Japan where its meat is a valued commodity due to its popularity for sushi and sashimi dishes. The motivation for the proposed measure is overexploitation, though annual quotas set by ICCAT (International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, to which all bluefin tuna fishing and farming countries in the Mediterranean are party, including Malta) were deemed much higher than those recommended by scientists to ensure sustainable fisheries for the species.

Malta has opposed the proposed trade ban, which will only come into force if it is backed by at least two-thirds of the 150 countries attending the Qatar meeting. Japan, which along with China is lobbying for the proposal to fail, has already voiced its defiance, saying it will ignore any imposed ban.

## **Pink and red coral**

There are almost 50 species of pink and red coral species, with one, the Mediterranean precious red coral, being endemic to our basin and parts of the east Atlantic. All have been exploited since antiquity for the manufacture of jewellery. Sweden, along with the US, is proposing the inclusion of all the species (albeit in a delayed fashion, after 18 months) in Appendix II. This would thus not halt international trade completely.

The inclusion is understandably opposed by a number of Mediterranean countries, particularly Italy and Spain, where the red coral industry is still vibrant.

The hub of the industry in Italy is at Torre del Greco, close to Naples, where a small red coral industry has existed since ancient times and attempts were made to revive it in the 1980s. Scattered patches of red coral can also be found in Maltese coastal and offshore waters.

## **Iranian salamander**

An interesting anecdote involves a rather obscure animal species - the Kaiser's spotted newt, a salamander endemic to Iran. The salamander has been recommended for inclusion in Appendix I of Cites, and is poised to become the first species needing protection from international trade due to the emerging reality of e-commerce.

In the wild there are now estimated to be fewer than 1,000 such salamanders, which are much sought after by wildlife collectors as a pet. This serves to highlight the pervasive threat to wildlife conservation posed by the internet.