

CITES

Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species

BY ALINA TUGEND

It may seem like a small phrase: “Not for commercial purposes.”

But when representatives from the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) attend the 17th Conference of the Parties of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) this September, it will be a phrase they will be watching carefully.

Under the treaty, nonprofit zoos and aquariums (as determined by tax status) are generally considered non-commercial. Maintaining that designation is important as AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums need to be able to transport animals, both to fulfill their conservation missions and to maintain sustainable populations.

For example, said Lynn McDuffie, animal records and regulatory affairs manager, Disney's Animals, Science and Environment, for

Disney's Animal Kingdom in Lake Buena Vista, Fla., many AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums are “trying to be a reserve for wild populations. Disease has decimated some amphibians in the wild. Zoos and aquariums are strongholds for those species that don't exist anymore in the wild,” and with these assurance populations, there is hope to eventually release them back to their native ranges.

But if zoos and aquariums are labeled as commercial, in many cases they would no longer be able to fulfill that mission. The reason is that if zoos and aquariums are considered commercial, it would be difficult to import a wide range of species.

“We're always looking at how ‘not for commercial purposes,’ is defined,” said Kris Vehrs, interim president and chief executive officer of AZA. For-profit entities, like Disney's Animal Kingdom, cannot import some CITES listed animals from overseas, although they can be moved within the United States, she said. Eleven percent of AZA's membership is for-profit.

“As a commercial entity, I understand the challenges we have to deal with,” McDuffie said.

First, a little background: in the early 1960s, widespread concern began growing at how

unregulated international trade was threatening the world's wild animals and plants. The Convention was drafted in 1963 at a meeting in Nairobi, Kenya. Ten years later, it was agreed upon at a meeting of representatives of 80 countries in Washington, DC, and two years after that, CITES entered into force. The U.S. was one of the leading forces behind the treaty negotiations.

Every two to three years, a Conference of the Parties (CoP)—that is a meeting of all the member countries (Parties) to CITES to review, discuss and negotiate any changes to how CITES is implemented is held. All decisions are voted on by those Parties.

This year's CoP will be held in Johannesburg, South Africa, in September 2016 and will include 181 Parties representing countries or regions. Thousands more will attend, including non-governmental organizations and members of the media.

Parties, often with the assistance of non-governmental organizations such as the AZA, submit their proposals 180 days before the CoP. These proposals could be focused on the listing, uplisting or downlisting of certain species and/or the introduction or modification of the Treaty's resolutions and decisions.

One of the CoP's main purposes will be to determine what species are added or removed from two Appendices. Appendix I is reserved for those animals and plants imminently threatened with extinction because of international trade, and trade in these species is permitted only in exceptional circumstances.



Some examples of Appendix I species include gorillas, sea turtles, tigers and giant pandas. Of the 931 species listed, approximately 136 species are native to the United States, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS).

Appendix II includes species that are not necessarily threatened with extinction, but may become so if international trade is not controlled. American ginseng, paddlefish, American alligators, mahogany and many corals are included in the 34,419 species listed under Appendix II, and of this number, approximately 1,432 species are native to the United States.

The USFWS is the lead U.S. government agency for CITES, although other relevant federal agencies have input. For the AZA—which has long been attending the CoPs—the focus is less on species proposals, said Vehrs, than on the resolutions that implement the treaty. Vehrs has attended 11 CoPs.

Although there has never been a real threat to label zoos and aquariums as for-profit, AZA needs to make sure the phrasing isn't redefined or amended.

"We don't want to be overly restrictive for legitimate zoos, aquariums and other facilities, but we don't want to make it too easy to export Appendix I species," said Sue Lieberman, the vice president of international policy for the Wildlife Conservation Society in the Bronx, N.Y., who has attended the Convention since 1989. For example, circuses shouldn't fall under the same category as zoos and aquariums.

In 2013, at the most recent CITES CoP which was held in Bangkok, only five representatives from AZA and AZA-accredited facilities attended; this year, there will be a contingent of about 12, including 10 professionals from AZA-accredited facilities, said Steve Olson, AZA vice president of federal relations.

So what can AZA representatives do if something crops up that they don't like?

"We would go to the U.S. delegation to say, 'this gives us heartburn,'" said Olson. Then the U.S. delegation as well as AZA and other NGO's could work with other like-minded government delegations to formulate a counter-proposal.

"If there is a message here, it's that zoos and aquariums have to be ever vigilant about



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subtle (or not so subtle) challenges to the definition of commercial purposes," he added.

Source coding is another issue that might come up at this CoP. Source code determination varies from country to country; in the U.S., for an Appendix I species to have an export permit issued as a source code "C"—that is, bred in captivity—it has been required that the species is reliably being bred to the second generation with no input from the wild in the past 10-15 years. In Europe, the standard is different, and in some cases, only requires that the species be bred in captivity without the other criteria. AZA needs to keep an eye on this area, McDuffie said.

AZA representatives also serve on working groups at the CoP. For example, McDuffie said, she was on a working group looking at the guidelines regarding the transport of animals, which were set by CITES using the International Air Transport Association (IATA) live animal regulations.

"A lot of large animals in Europe and the U.S. move by truck—possibly by rail in Europe—but we were trying to use the airline guidelines," she said. For instance, "if you're moving by land, you don't need to put a pelican in a crate in the back of a truck—you can put it in the stall."

The working group ended up drafting new transport guidelines, using the IATA live animal regulations as the basis with additional options with regards to land transport, which were adopted by CITES.

Lieberman has attended 10 CITES conferences since 1989 and knows what's going to be a major issue at the meeting this September in Johannesburg.

"Poaching," she said. "It's still rampant for elephants, rhinos and tigers."

There's a lot of lobbying and advocacy that goes on at the CoP, and it's hard to predict what's going to happen—for example at the last CoP in 2013, to the surprise of many, countries that typically oppose "uplisting" of sharks agreed to put one species on Appendix II, McDuffie said.

"It was the first time that I remember a country such as Norway supporting the uplisting of a shark to Appendix II," she added. And according to CITES, it was the first time that a shark species of great commercial value, and traded in high volumes, was included in Appendix II.

Besides the actual work that is done at the CoP, Lieberman said, the tremendous press that surrounds the conference—especially in Europe and Africa—is a benefit in itself. "It's a great opportunity to make people more aware of the extensive global threats that wildlife face," she said.

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