





CITES

TALK OF ZOOS BUBBLES TO THE CoP

BY ALINA TUGEND

There was good news for pangolins, a mammal that looks like a scaly anteater, for the African grey parrot and for those worried about the trade in ivory. For zoos and aquariums, however, the message was a little more mixed.



Temminck's ground pangolin

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hose were some of the results of September's 17th Conference of the Parties (CoP) of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), held in Johannesburg, South Africa, last September. Thirteen members representing the Association of Zoos and Aquariums and AZA-accredited facilities attended the meeting, the most ever for AZA.

Every two or three years, the CoP—a meeting of all member countries that are party to the treaty—is held to discuss and negotiate any changes to how CITES is implemented and to discuss the animal and plant species listings.

While the decision to uplist all species of pangolins, the African grey parrot and to limit the ivory market was applauded by AZA, there was concern about strong anti-zoo sentiment among some countries attending the CoP, said Kris Vehrs, AZA's executive director.

"There was a lot of vitriol on the floor," Vehrs said. "That was surprising."

Some African and South American countries are now expressing—more vehemently than in the past—the opinion that zoos and aquariums do little for conservation and that they are essentially commercial entities to breed and sell animals.

The furor arose during a committee meeting to discuss concerns about international trade in live animals, particularly African elephants and white rhinoceroses listed on Appendix II. Appendix II species are defined as those that are not necessarily threatened with extinction, but may become so if international trade is not controlled.

These animals can only be traded or sold to "appropriate and acceptable" destinations. The U.S. government representatives had proposed revisions to that phrase, believing it needed to be clarified further.

However, in committee, the U.S. proposal was combined with a proposal from Mali that proposed that all African elephants should be left in the wild and not be traded or sold to any zoos or circuses, arguing that zoos and circuses pay no attention to the health or welfare of the animals. A number of other countries,



African gray parrot

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including Kenya, Israel and Uganda, supported the proposal; the chair of the committee then asked the U.S. and Mali to work on a compromise document.

“We knew there would be a discussion of ‘appropriate and acceptable,’ Vehrs said. “We just didn’t know it would be zoo-bashing.”

The problem is that representatives of some of those countries, along with some of the many animal welfare groups that attend the CoP, don’t distinguish between AZA-accredited zoos and zoos in other countries that may be roadside attractions, said Michael Kreger, vice-president of conservation at the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium in Powell, Ohio.

AZA accredited zoos “are a very small portion of all zoos worldwide, but are painted with the same brush,” added Steve Olson, AZA’s vice president of federal relations.

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The combination of these moves prompted the concern expressed by Mali and some other African countries at the CoP, although “it’s a movement that’s been subtly building,” Olson added.

In the end, in order for an Appendix II wild African elephant or white rhinoceros to be exported “both countries will have to agree that this particular transaction will promote conservation in the field,” Vehrs said. “That’s a really high test—a higher test than for Appendix I species. We can live with the end result, but it does set a different precedent.”

For Olson, the takeaway is that “there now seems to be a movement toward attaching conservation work to CITES import and export permits, and that’s a new twist. It seems a bit misplaced because CITES is an international trade treaty and consequently adds another uncertainty into the permitting process.”

Colleen McCann, the curator of mammals at the Bronx Zoo in Bronx, N.Y., who was attending her 6th CITES meeting, agreed that the concern about animals going from the wild to zoos was more definitive than in the past, but said it was understandable where it was coming from given the heightened elephant issues.

“Illegal trade has gotten increasingly sophisticated,” she said. “Range countries are trying to protect their resources. We have to show that conservation breeding is not at all the same as commercial breeding.”

AZA’s role, now more than ever, is “to educate people in decision-making positions about the critical role of zoos and aquariums,” Kreger added.

But that means calling on AZA representatives from all over the world.

“We need to get more of our international members attending CITES,” said Olson, noting that eight countries outside the U.S. have AZA-accredited facilities. “We also need to do a better job educating countries like Kenya and Brazil about what AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums do for conservation. I think that message has been getting lost.”

And the focus shouldn’t just be on what zoos and aquariums directly do for animals, Kreger added.

“Zoos need to say that conservation is a people problem,” he said. “Zoos need to work more with local communities so their livelihood doesn’t rely on poaching or capturing wildlife to sell abroad.”

For example, the African grey parrot, which is a popular pet, was uplisted from Appendix II to Appendix I, which is a good thing to protect the parrot, but “it’s going to put people who catch those birds out of work,” Kreger said. “We need to help find them alternative means of work.”

Kreger used as an example a program the Columbus Zoo partners with in Rwanda providing funds for local people to start tree nurseries to prevent deforestation for fuel and carving.

Another phrase that the AZA contingent always keeps an eye on is “not for commercial purposes.” Generally speaking, zoos and aquariums are considered non-commercial entities. If that were to ever change, and they were treated as commercial, it would be much more difficult, if not impossible, for facilities to import Appendix I-listed species that are needed to fulfill conservation missions and to maintain sustainable populations.

At this CoP, “nothing changed in that area,” said Lynn McDuffie, animal records and regulatory affairs manager at Disney’s Animal Kingdom in Lake Buena Vista, Fla.

African elephants are listed on Appendix II, which includes species not necessarily threatened with extinction, but that may become so if international trade is not controlled.





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Despite some of the acrimony, AZA representatives said there was plenty to celebrate.

“I wasn’t surprised by the pangolin listing, but I was happy to see it happen,” said Hannah Bailey, curator of birds and natural encounters for the Houston Zoo in Houston, Texas, who was attending her first CoP. “One of the NGOs was passing out stuffed pangolin animals, and an African gentleman held one while presenting the overall proposal to uplist the pangolins. He was so proud to be presenting this to preserve the species.”

All parties to the Convention voted to list the eight Indian and African species of pangolin on Appendix I, which is reserved for those animals and plants imminently threatened with extinction because of international trade, and trade in those species is permitted only in exceptional circumstances.

“The pangolin has become the iconic species of wildlife trafficking,” said Olson. Some examples of Appendix I species include gorillas, Asian elephants, giant pandas—and now pangolins.

The CoP also called for countries where there is a legal, domestic market for ivory that is contributing to poaching or illegal trade to take all necessary legislative, regulatory and enforcement measures to close markets that contribute to illegal trade or poaching.

“That was a big deal,” Vehrs said. “The population is crashing. It’s time to do everything in our power to save the African elephant.”

Added Rosa Fini, chief legal and ethics officer for the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo in Cleveland, Ohio, who also attended her first CITES meeting, “it was very significant that the closure of domestic ivory markets happened on an international stage.”

What struck Fini most as a first-time attendee was the excitement of having some 3,500 people from all over the world focusing on issues of conservation of flora and fauna.

“There was rigorous debate and it was very exciting for a newcomer,” she said. “I feel energized by the more proactive role AZA can play. And with regards to the troubling comments we heard about zoos, I see our participation as even more important. We have already started to talk about what we can do.”

To that end, AZA created a CITES subcommittee to sit under the AZA Government Affairs Committee to work on, among other things, preparing information documents, provide in-depth analysis of proposed species listings and proposed resolutions and create alliances, particularly on the international level in looking toward the next CoP scheduled for 2019 in Sri Lanka.

“This is a call to action to better articulate how we benefit species in the wild. We’re our own little known secret,” said McCann. “We have to get out there—we have to ensure that people see what we do for species conservation and absolutely continue to improve what we do.”

Alina Tugend is a writer based in Larchmont, N.Y.