






BY ALINA TUGEND

The ELEPHANT in the Room

CITES 2019





The elephant in the room was, well, the elephant.

The debate over how restrictive the trade in live African elephants should be—and what kind of precedent it sets that could affect zoos and other entities—was one of the main points of contention at the 18th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties (CoP) of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

“We want to ensure that trade is legal and sustainable and in the best interest of conservation of the species, but there are ways to do that without using such a broad brush,” said Craig Hoover, executive vice president of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. Hoover served as chair of one of the two major CITES committees at the conference, held in Geneva, Switzerland.

The two-week CoP is held every two to three years for all Parties to the treaty (182 countries plus the European Union). Representatives of the countries discuss and negotiate how CITES is implemented and which animals and plant species should be listed in the CITES Appendices because they are endangered or otherwise should be protected from the impact of international trade.

In addition, hundreds of members of non-governmental organizations attend, including AZA and other zoo and aquarium community representatives.

Much of the focus at CoPs is on which animals or plants will be added or removed from two Appendices. Species placed in

Appendix I are considered threatened with extinction due to international trade and trade is only allowed in exceptional circumstances. Appendix II species are not necessarily threatened with extinction but may become so if international trade is not controlled.

African elephants are listed in Appendix I for all African countries except four—Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe—which successfully moved to downlist their elephant populations to Appendix II in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Hoover said. But that Appendix II listing comes with an annotation that states, among other things, that live elephants from Botswana and Zimbabwe may only be exported to an “appropriate and acceptable destination.”

Many animal protection organizations and a number of countries, including other African countries outside of southern Africa, supported a proposal at CoP 18 to further restrict the export of live African elephants, limiting it so they could only be exported to other range countries within Africa—without exception. The proposal was driven in particular about concerns regarding Zimbabwe, which has exported a substantial number of elephants to China.

There was a tumultuous debate at the conference in which the proposal was reopened, and “we were left with a very complicated, not very satisfactory result,” Hoover said.

The compromise result creates a very limited exception for the export of live elephants from





Songbird species in Southeast Asia are being poached and traded for songbird competitions, as pets, and for food.
Pictured: Bali Myna

Botswana and Zimbabwe to countries outside Africa, but establishes additional oversight obligations that will be difficult to meet, Hoover said. “In fact, in many ways, the compromise is stricter than an Appendix I listing.”

The proposal is unlikely to directly affect most U.S. zoos, but AZA and other organizations had concerns that the result was that some African countries would be unduly restricted and unable to make their own decisions about the export of their elephants.

“Typically, there’s some control over exports by those countries when it’s an Appendix II animal,” said Michael Kreger, vice president of conservation at the Columbus Zoo in Columbus, Ohio. “And here they’re telling the range countries what they can do with them.”

He and Hoover said, however, that their main concern is that it undermines the CITES process.

“It sets a terrible precedent for applying restrictions on the movement of Appendix-II animals to other species,” Hoover said.

Sue Lieberman, vice president of international policy for the Wildlife Conservation Society in New York, N.Y., added that the proposal “says it’s never in the best interest for an elephant to go outside of the range countries. It’s so absolutist and very confusing.”

Aside from elephants, there was discussion about other species and proposals to list many new species or uplist already listed species. Among the biggest debates was the decision

to list all giraffes in Appendix II for the first time, something the zoo community was mixed about, Hoover said.

“The giraffe population is declining and is cause for concern, but the decline appears to be driven by poaching rather than international trade,” he said. The AZA delegation did not take a stance on listing giraffes.

Eighteen additional shark and ray species also were added to Appendix II.

While having a species listed in either Appendix is often seen as a victory, Kreger disagreed. “We shouldn’t celebrate every time an animal is listed,” he said. “It’s good that it’s been listed, but it’s bad it’s gotten to the point where it has to be listed.”

Too often it’s the charismatic or high-profile animals that get attention, but Sunny Nelson, the Hope B. McCormick curator of birds at Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago, Ill., said getting the CoP and CITES to pay attention to a crisis in Asian songbirds was one of her goals at the event.

“Species in Southeast Asia are being poached and traded for various reasons, including for songbird competitions, as pets, and for food, but we don’t have a sense of the scope of how other songbird species worldwide are being affected by similar illegal trade issues,” she said.

There are more than 6,000 species of songbirds; Nelson said the goal is to look at the entire taxa to see which species are impacted by international trade.

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-Rosalina Fini, chief legal and ethics officer for Cleveland Metroparks

The U.S. and Sri Lanka jointly submitted a document addressing this issue. It didn't include species proposals but raised the topic to bring awareness of the issue, and several countries supported the document. The hope is that before the next CoP, there will be enough information to identify which songbirds are affected by international trade and need to be listed in Appendix I or II.

Although species listings are important, there is much more to the CoP than that. It's an opportunity for countries and organizations to lobby, to inform, to educate.

Anti-zoo sentiment seems to be growing at the CoP, said Hoover, who has attended eight conferences, and in response, AZA—along with other zoo coalitions internationally and member zoos—have become better at telling the story of what zoos and aquariums do.

“One of the most important things for me was the work that the AZA team did in the time period between the last Conference of the Parties in 2016 and now,” said Rosalina Fini, chief legal and ethics officer for Cleveland Metroparks, in Cleveland, Ohio. “At the last conference in 2016, there were more negative things said about zoos than positive—I was taken aback at the rancor. We came out of the conference knowing that we had to communicate our conservation story much better.”

And that meant AZA and others had to be proactive, rather than reactive, and more vocal, said Steve Olson, AZA's senior vice president of government affairs.

To accomplish that goal, Fini said, AZA and its partners—WCS, San Diego Zoo Global, the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums, and the European Association of Zoos and Aquaria—

engaged in more strategic collaborations leading up to and at the latest CoP.

That included WAZA holding a panel discussion (AZA was the moderator), which highlighted zoo and aquarium conservation efforts with CITES-listed species. These side events are held at lunchtime and compete with numerous others, so the fact that about 150 people attended was a great success.

Each CoP attendee was also given a flash drive of zoo conservation projects around the world.

AZA and other zoo coalitions also were more active in offering comments—called interventions—on proposals.

“It was a concerted effort between all of us,” Fini said. “We would take turns being the lead on the intervention, sometimes speaking on behalf of all groups, at other times individually.”

Too often, Fini said, negative stories that come out of some zoos are used to paint the story about all zoos.

“The message we need to get out there is that there are differences in zoos and aquariums and all zoos and aquariums need to rise up and act according to our higher standards,” she said.

Lieberman said that there were more zoo representatives attending than ever before, bringing a needed perspective. “Zoos have a unique expertise in what can be bred and what is very difficult,” she said.

The latest CoP was her twelfth, and she summed it up this way:

“I thought there were good decisions and good outcomes,” she said. “Governments disagree at meetings and that's a healthy thing.”

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



