

WILDLIFE EXPLOITATION

The Commercial Trade Threatens Species Worldwide

Earth Day 1990: Elephants are still being killed for their ivory.

Tens of thousands of primates are captured and exported every year for biomedical research.

Chimpanzees continue to be captured and traded illegally.

The skins of 50 million fur animals are traded internationally every year.

Millions of parrots and other birds are captured in the wild each year for the commercial pet trade.

More than 10 million turtles, crocodiles, snakes, and reptiles are killed annually for the skin trade, involving both a "legal" trade and a large, lucrative illegal trade.

The illegal trade in wildlife, including spotted-cat furs, elephant ivory, tropical parrots, and other species, is a multimillion dollar business.

Will it ever end?

Such a litany of animal exploitation makes it seem that nothing has changed in wildlife protection in the twenty years since the first Earth Day. Fortunately, however, although the international commercial trade in wild animals and animal products continues at an alarming rate, treaties and legislation exist that weren't in place twenty years ago. For the next twenty years, those dedicated to wildlife protection may well have as their goal not passage of new legislation but the vigorous enforcement and implementation of existing statutes.

Twenty years ago, there was no Endangered Species Act (ESA) as we know it,

no Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), and no Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). The people of the United States and, indeed, the entire world were awakened to the extinction crisis facing many species in the 1970s, due in no small part to the environmental consciousness-raising events of the first Earth Day. Progress has been made: there is no doubt that some species alive and recovering today would be extinct (and others nearly extinct) if these laws and treaties had not been passed.

Yet the commercial exploitation of wildlife, and the resultant endangerment of species, continues. We should use this anniversary of Earth Day to reassess the enormous price of wildlife exploitation, particularly in the context of the international commercial trade. Why does this trade continue? Who benefits? What legislation and treaties exist to protect wildlife? Can the system be improved?

Wildlife threatened with extinction include familiar species such as chimpanzees, gorillas, pandas, whales, whooping cranes, condors, and elephants, as well as many unfamiliar species. A student once asked me to name the five most endangered species: I replied that I couldn't name them, since they were the five species that became extinct in the two minutes it took to ask the question, before they were ever even known to exist and be described by scientists.

The primary factor threatening many species with

extinction is habitat loss due to human activities. The rapidly expanding human population worldwide and its resulting agricultural and developmental demands are the greatest threats to the continued existence of healthy habitats and species. If something is not done in this decade to control the exploding human population, all of our efforts to protect endangered species will be but a holding action forestalling the inevitable, as human needs outstrip the ability of the land to support the requisite species' diversity. The consequences of the irrevocable loss of a species or a population are usually unpredictable and often disastrous, a loss measured not only in terms of its impact on human health and welfare, but one which also results in the loss of vital components of the world's ecosystems. The human species is the principal culprit.

In response to the crisis of endangerment facing countless species, including the commercial slaughter of whales and other marine mammals, the U.S. Congress passed the MMPA in 1972 and the ESA in 1973, both of which were reauthorized in 1989. Both of these landmark pieces of legislation have gone a long way in addressing the problems facing many species, yet any legislation is only as good as its funding base and enforcement effort. Far more is necessary at the state and federal level in the way of funding, implementation, and enforcement if a meaningful protection of threatened and endangered species and their habitats is to take place.

Habitat destruction, and concomitant misguided development projects, has had a disastrous impact on biodiversity worldwide.



Left: Some parrot species have been traded until their populations are virtually wiped out, then they are placed under CITES protection. Inset: Wild-caught parrots on their way to market.

The wildlife trade continues because it generates an enormous amount of money. . . .

The wildlife trade, for example, has largely been ignored in this context, although, for many species, the consequences are now irrevocable. Yet the exploitation of wildlife touches all of us and is directly affected by our actions—for either good or ill—and, as such, is particularly amenable to activist involvement. Wildlife exploitation is a multibillion dollar international business that includes everything from animal products (such as furs, ivory, reptile skins, and kangaroo leather) to live animals for the pet and biomedical markets (monkeys, parrots, lizards, snakes, frogs, and fish, among others).

In 1972, the United Nations Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment recommended worldwide controls over the wildlife trade. In response, the CITES treaty was concluded in March of 1973 in Washington, D.C.; it was subsequently ratified and came into force in 1975, with 18 countries as parties to the convention. As of January 1990, 104 countries had become signatories. CITES is probably the best known conservation treaty in existence. But, for better or worse, CITES as a treaty can have no impact on endangered

species that are not subject to trade. An international biodiversity convention scheduled for 1992 may help those other species.

CITES serves a critical function as the world community's principal means of protecting threatened and endangered wildlife from the most disastrous effects of international trade. CITES provides two levels of protection to species threatened by trade: commercial trade is outlawed for Appendix I (endangered) species and is regulated through a permit process for Appendix II (threatened) species. (The last biennial Conference of the Parties of CITES was held in October 1989 in Switzerland.)

It is through the cooperation of the 104 CITES parties that the international wildlife trade is both monitored and regulated. The 1989 Conference of the Parties was a watershed meeting for CITES: the world community, and the world press, paid more attention to this meeting than any before, in large part due to the crisis facing the African elephant.

It is useful to reevaluate the effectiveness of CITES in controlling and monitoring the trade in threatened and endangered species in the context of the impact of that trade on African elephant populations. Until last year's CITES Conference, the African elephant was listed as an Appendix II species (recognized as threatened or likely to become so due to trade); all trade was to be regulated through a permit and quota system. The CITES Ivory-Quota Control System failed in its attempts to control and regulate the ivory trade. The tusks of close to 100,000 poached elephants were exported from Africa in one year, in spite of CITES. It could be argued that the veneer of legality created by the CITES ivory-quota system provided a cover for and, indeed, stimulated, the illegal trade.

The world community finally realized that the only hope for the African elephant is a total ban on its trade. This was a watershed event for CITES, in that the party nations realized that market forces and illegal trade could get so out of hand that CITES was incapable of regulating trade. Yet "legal" and illegal trade continues for hundreds of other species. Any treaty or legislation is only as good as its enforcement infrastructure. In the context of animal suffering and endangerment, surely the time has come to reevaluate the nature and very existence of the wildlife trade.

The wildlife trade continues because it gen-

erates an enormous amount of money, though very little of it ever benefits the Third World countries from which the majority of wildlife is taken. As long as consumers in the wealthy nations continue to purchase furs, ivory, wild birds, pet reptiles, coral jewelry, sea turtle products, wild cacti, wild orchids, and wildlife souvenirs, a market and, consequently, an industry will exist to exploit these species. For many exporting nations, particularly those with marginal economies, the wildlife trade could potentially provide needed foreign currency. Yet, unless the trade is strictly regulated (an exceedingly rare event), the acceptance of this foreign currency by a country constitutes the selling of its patrimony and heritage. Many Third World countries, such as Brazil and Mexico, consider the wildlife trade to be a form of economic imperialism and ban all exports of their native wildlife.

The parrot trade represents an excellent case to exemplify the problems of the pet trade. The commercial trade in wild-caught parrots for the pet market has been justified by the importers and their lobbyists as being acceptable in the context of the sustainable utilization of wildlife resources. Yet, in fact, the trade has wreaked havoc on wild-bird

populations. There is no evidence that the trade in *any* species of parrot is sustainable or that any single tract of tropical forest has been preserved for the purpose of providing wild birds.

Indeed, the opposite is the case. The pet market is a serious threat to the continued existence of many species, including many rare or endangered species. While semantic distinctions exist between the "legal" trade and smuggling markets, as a practical matter the two are inseparable, for the "legal" trade creates a market demand that smugglers exploit.

Species such as some of the macaws and parrots have been traded until their populations are wiped out, at which time they are placed on CITES Appendix I, which bans all commercial trade. Every time CITES meets, more species of parrots and their relatives are placed on Appendix I. For example, last fall, the Moluccan cockatoo, a once common species, was placed on Appendix I, since it is now in danger of extinction. The placement of more species on an endangered list is not cause for celebration, as it represents a failure of sorts: If CITES were truly working, the issuance of nondetriment findings would prevent nonsustainable trade. In fact, no wild-bird species has ever been demonstrated sci-

entifically to be able to be traded commercially without detriment to its population.

To quote the International Council for Bird Preservation (ICBP), of which The HSUS is an active member:

While there are a number of reasons for the decline or disappearance of individual species, one of the most persistent and pernicious is the taking of birds in the wild for the cage-bird trade. A number of species, particularly parrots, are either extinct or severely endangered due to the almost unrestricted market for them in the United States.

The capture and export of wild birds depletes wild populations and is anathema to true conservation interests. Certainly, many species that are not yet endangered will become so if the commercial trade continues at its present levels. We don't allow the capture and sale of our domestic wild birds, and we should afford the same level of consideration and protection to the wildlife heritage of other nations.

The only reasonable solution to the wild-bird trade, in the interest of conservation and the prevention of needless animal suffering, is to put an end to the commercial trade in wild-caught birds and educate the public to avoid purchasing wild-caught birds.

At CITES in 1989, the world community recognized the danger facing the African elephant and banned totally the trade in elephants and elephant products; several countries have, unfortunately, indicated they will not abide by that decision.

The world community needs to reevaluate radically the way it looks at the utilization of threatened and endangered species, however. As it stands now, species can be and are exploited until they are shown to be endangered. In the case of the African elephant, an end to commercial trade has, one can hope, come soon enough to prevent its extinction. But, for many other wildlife species, the trade has so decimated populations that recovery, even in the absence of exploitation, is doubtful. There have been no studies to determine the sustainable level of exploitation, or even to determine what constitutes sustainable use, for such species. In a practical sense, it may well be an oxymoron.

Perhaps it is dangerous to think, in relation to the threat to biodiversity, that massive commercial trade in any species, whether yet endangered or not, can adequately or effectively be controlled. The entire concept of sustainable utilization of wildlife, as opposed to other natural resources, must indeed be reevaluated. If we do not give the benefit of the doubt to the species now, in another twenty years humankind will have been responsible for the disappearance of countless irreplaceable species. When these species are gone, it will be too late. If we make the wrong decisions today, it will only take a few years of uncontrolled exploitation to eliminate what has taken millions of years to evolve. Rather, let us all look forward to a celebration on Earth Day in the year 2010 with the expectation that we did, indeed, make the right decisions today. ■

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The commercial trade in chimpanzees made this baby an orphan; trappers killed its mother in Liberia.