

THE GLOBAL FIGHT FOR WILDLIFE

Humane Society International works to curtail cruel trade

by TERESA TELECKY, PH.D.

Searching for warmth and safety in the Arctic, a baby polar bear emerges for the first time from a maternity den and leans into his mother's fur, not yet aware of the unprecedented danger they face: the disappearance of icy foraging platforms now melting into the sea.

At the other end of the Northern hemisphere, a tree frog perches in a Guatemalan forest, her large eyes searching the misty night for a passing insect. One of the last surviving members of her species, she lives in a world so altered by deforestation, pollution, climate change, and disease that black-eyed tree frog numbers have dropped by 80 percent in only 10 years.

Despite the direct hits to these species, humans have conspired to further threaten their very existence. Polar bears who fall victim to trophy hunting in Canada end up as rugs and other home décor in Japan and the EU. Tree frogs land in glass aquariums in the U.S., Europe, and Asia, if they don't die first on their long journey through the international pet trade.

This year, a world away from the rainforests and Arctic seas of the Americas, the Species Survival Network—a global coalition of animal protection and conservation organizations—came together to halt these paths to extinction. As palm trees swayed in the breeze outside the Sheraton in Doha, Qatar, last March, we staked our claim once again at the U.N. Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

It was the 15th such gathering of representatives from the 175 countries that regulate commercial trade in plants and animals—and the sixth one that I've attended—but it was also a meeting of many firsts: the first time a powerful bloc of Latin American countries emerged to fight for frogs and iguanas, the first time 23 African countries coalesced to slam the door on the African elephant ivory trade, and the first time Iran submitted a proposal to save a native animal.

Though we managed to gain or maintain protections for some species, others were not so lucky. The convention began

meeting in the 1970s to put controls on rampant international trade in wildlife, but many attendees aren't there for the animals' sake. For every species represented, there is an industry arguing to reduce or eliminate its protections: the ivory carvers, the coral jewelry manufacturers, the fur traders, the trophy hunters, the pet dealers, the whalers, and the fisheries, to name a few.

As the director of wildlife for Humane Society International and a founder of the Species Survival Network, I view both the losses and the victories as temporary. I have to, because the fight is never-ending, the stakes too high. Capture of wild animals can devastate populations and cause tremendous suffering. Global illegal trade is booming, to the tune of between \$5 billion and \$20 billion annually, according to government estimates. And as one of the largest consumers of wild animals and plants, the U.S. has its fair share of culpability.



By the start of the CITES meeting—which was launched with a mesmerizing cultural presentation by dozens of chanting, saber-wielding men in traditional, floor-length white garments—the excitement was palpable. Latin American delegates snapped up tiny rubber tree frogs supplied by HSI; Mexico's Hesiquio Benítez Díaz donned one on his shoulder as he told the audience why *Agalychnis* tree frogs needed more protection.

In the end, not a single delegate voiced opposition to the proposal, which may ultimately save tens of thousands from capture and export each year. And minutes after the gavel came down in tree frogs' favor, proposals for four species of spiny-tailed iguanas from Honduras and Guatemala also sailed through unopposed.

Central and South America were on a roll, but such seemingly quick victories belie the many months of work that precede them. Attendees from HSI, The HSUS, and other members of the Species Survival Network had prepared for this day for



two years. From researching species of concern to helping countries develop proposals to lobbying for votes, our work on behalf of the world's wildlife leaves no stone unturned.

We've come a long way since my first CITES meeting in 1992, where the issues were too vast for one person to comprehend and the input of animal protection organizations was often lost in the din. Just 18 years later, the Species Survival Network has evolved from modest beginnings involving 10 organizations into a powerful voice representing 115 members from 64 countries. Our institutional knowledge is immense: hundreds of years of combined experience rescuing confiscated live animals, helping authorities fight poaching, and lobbying for better laws and regulations. We have empowered nongovernmental organizations to make a difference in how their governments vote. And we've allowed country delegates access to our network and provided training



The critically endangered Kaiser's spotted newt, found only in four streams in Iran, has been heavily poached for the pet trade in North America, Europe, and Japan. Professor Mozafar Sharifi's CITES proposal—the first prepared by an Iranian scientist—led to a commercial trade ban: “[It’s] very exciting to see that your knowledge can be linked to practical conservation practices,” he says.

and funding for conservation projects.

No issue escapes our attention now. For black-eyed tree frogs, we were on the case right after we received records showing Guatemalan imports into the U.S. In tracing the origins of one shipment, we discovered

that the accompanying paperwork was illegal and that U.S. officials weren't even aware of a Guatemalan ban on the animals' export. Compounding the issue was the similarity in the five species of *Agalychnis* tree frogs, a common “lookalike” problem that makes it easier for illegal traders to slip endangered animals into shipments of more prolific members of their genus.

We had to stop the exports before remaining populations were wiped out. By the time the CITES meeting started, HSI and the other members of the Species Survival Network had rallied the entire Latin America region behind our proposal—dozens of countries in all. Their support was critical to our efforts to save a species in peril.



Our polar bear proposal did not fare as well, falling prey to greed and a shameless rejection of scientific data. Canada is the only

► SPECIES SNAPSHOT: POLAR BEARS

By 2050, only about 7,000 polar bears may remain—all in Canada, where 100 bears are legally killed each year by trophy hunters. Inuits kill another 300 using skidoos and high-powered rifles instead of the sleds and spears of the past. Polar bears' current status on Appendix II—one of three categories for listing species under CITES—means their parts can be traded as long as the exporting country issues a permit and maintains certain controls. A listing on Appendix I would require import permits as well and ban trade for primarily commercial purposes. But the EU killed this year's proposal to upgrade polar bears' status in the final round.

In their 200,000 to 250,000 years on Earth, polar bears have survived at least four major periods of global warming, says researcher Nikita Ovsyanikov. Now these adaptive poster children of modern-day climate change face perhaps their most formidable threat yet: the human predator.

“Biologically, they can survive if we do not chase them, if we do not shoot them,” says Ovsyanikov, who has studied polar bears for 20 years at Wrangel Island, a nature reserve in Chukotka, Russia. Though ice-free summers will force more bears onto land, evidence suggests that some will find alternate food sources or survive enough to make it to winter, when their seal-hunting habitats are restored.

But without more protections, they will often die trying at the hands of humans. “What’s specifically unique for this present global warming [is] too many people in the Arctic ... and too many people who want to shoot polar bears and get profits and advantages from them,” says Ovsyanikov.

Even when conditions for polar bears were optimal in the mid-20th century, intensive hunting pushed the species to the edge of extinction, leading to an international conservation agreement in

1973. In Russia, the animals had already been living in relative peace due to a 1957 ban on polar bear hunting and efforts to protect their habitats—but the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early '90s changed the dynamics. “People were really in some cases in villages facing problems of getting food, so ... everything was hunted for food, including polar bears,” says Ovsyanikov.

A black market for their pelts developed, exacerbated in recent years by imports from Canada that are “camouflaging sales of illegally taken polar bear pelts from Russia,” Ovsyanikov wrote in his statement supporting the proposed CITES trade ban. “This marketing is also stimulating poaching on polar bears in Russia.”

A decision by Russian delegates to reject the proposal runs counter to national sentiment, he says. “When I talk to people here in Russia—just to ordinary people who are not professionals in this field—everybody wants to have polar bears alive ... because they are so special,” he says. “[A] polar bear alive is the heritage of the whole nation ... and a dead polar bear serves for profits of only a few people.”

As someone who's had as many as 2,000 close encounters with


100
polar bears are legally killed each year by trophy hunters

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► SPECIES SNAPSHOT: AFRICAN ELEPHANTS

The ivory trade claimed half of Africa's elephants in a single decade. If not for a 1989 CITES ban, perhaps only 100,000 of the estimated 400,000 remaining elephants would be left in the wild. Yet poaching continues unabated, decimating the entire herd in Sierra Leone's wildlife park in 2009, for example, and reducing the population in Chad's Zakouma National Park from 3,885 in 2005 to just 617 last year. Zambia's and Tanzania's proposals to reduce protections for elephants in their countries and sell existing ivory stockpiles overseas could have set a hard-to-reverse precedent for downlisting of other populations. Irrefutable scientific evidence helped defeat the proposal.



Soapstone, timber, sisal fiber. These are some of the aliases borne by elephant tusks passing through a maze of ports on their circuitous journeys to wealthier lands. In their final incarnation, they land on a desk, in a shrine, around someone's neck, carved into a small statue or necklace charm or Japanese or Chinese signature stamps.

The obscured contents of mislabeled shipping containers snaking their way through the illicit ivory trade represent the paltry remains of thousands of majestic creatures slaughtered each year. Nearly impossible to track through traditional detective work, elephant poaching is, in many ways, the perfect crime, buried under layers of lies: false paperwork, smuggling networks, inaccurate herd estimates, and corruption.

Annual profits from illegal wildlife trade run in the billions. Only a tiny fraction of the millions of containers of goods shipped around the world are inspected, and not usually for animal contraband. "So what better crime is there to get involved in right now?" asks Samuel Wasser of the University of Washington's Center for Conservation Biology. "And it's destroying our wildlife as we know it in the process."

But by pairing DNA analysis of dung samples with mapping of elephant gene frequencies throughout Africa, Wasser has cracked the case—and with such precision that he can trace the source of a 2-by-2-inch piece of tusk to its valley of origin. The results point to the presence of organized crime syndicates decimating whole populations. "From the work that our center has

been doing with Interpol," says Wasser, "it was quite clear that these guys are getting away with murder, literally."

If it weren't for Wasser's techniques, elephants likely would have suffered yet another blow this year at CITES, where Zambia and Tanzania sought approval to sell ivory stockpiles. After a 2002 seizure of a shipment that had wound its way through Malawi to Mozambique to South Africa and finally to Singapore, Wasser traced tusks to elephants in Zambia. Seizures in Hong Kong and Taiwan in 2006 led to elephants in Tanzania.

"What was happening was poachers were being paid to go out and hammer the same place over and over again to fill the work order," says Wasser.

The two countries' CITES proposals were a flagrant attempt to bypass a 9-year moratorium on sales from government inventories. Though previously sanctioned sales were supposed to include only tusks from elephants who'd died naturally or through official culling, many believe such activity encourages the black market. And evidence suggests that some "legal" stockpiles serve as repositories for poached ivory.

To protect the spirit of the agreement, Wasser and his colleagues presented the findings to CITES delegates. "It's one thing to just go against the moratorium," says Wasser. "But to be two of the most culpable countries in terms of illegal ivory trade in Africa ... to me was just over the top. And I just thought, 'This can't happen,' as did many others."

That he managed to prevent it from

happening is small comfort to Wasser, who laments attempts to justify ivory trade as an antidote to human-elephant conflicts—situations he believes derive from the prevalence of poaching. Even in protected areas, elephants are still subject to illegal hunting and thus no longer feel safe there. Those who leave are more likely to wander onto local farms and fight more aggressively when farmers try to protect their crops, Wasser notes, citing an elevated fear of humans deriving from past experiences with poachers. While the existence of these so-called "problem" elephants is often blamed on overpopulation, that view is distorted; elephant numbers are unnaturally high in fenced-off regions with artificial watering holes, says Wasser, but their overall decline across the continent is drastic.

The saddest part of the story of African elephants is the potentially irreparable damage to their social structures. In examining a heavily poached population in Tanzania, Wasser's team discovered that about 30 percent of the females are solitary, the same ratio measured following the worldwide ivory sales ban in 1989. "And female elephants should never be solitary," he says. "... Those females were ones that were just old enough to survive when poaching was at its peak, and all their relatives were killed."

Without intact social groups, the animals have low reproductive success and little capacity to face ongoing challenges, says Wasser—and "they really don't recover much."

— **Nancy Lawson**



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the animals, Ovsyanikov rejects claims that their increasing presence on land is so threatening as to require killing them. He's developed nonlethal methods for deflecting incidents with this often misunderstood species. As he tells his young audiences at a Russian ecological center, these expressive bears—among the most playful animals on earth—are such good mothers that humans would “probably have no problems in raising kids properly” if they spent more time observing bear behavior.

To do so much longer, they'll have to change some behaviors of their own. Adding to the pressures on the species was a recent decision to allow so-called subsistence hunting in Russia—already an approved practice in the U.S., Canada, and Greenland. Such hunts are about money, not culture, says Ovsyanikov, adding that Chukotka natives have historically eaten fish and hunted mostly walruses, seals, and reindeer. “I don't consider aboriginal hunting with modern snowmobiles and modern rifles traditional subsistence. They have hot water in the villages. They have electricity. They have planes coming almost every day. ... So what's the reason to shoot anything?”

— Nancy Lawson

country that allows polar bears to be killed by trophy hunters or for international trade in their skins and other body parts. It should be obvious that the resulting death of 400 of these animals annually is ludicrously short-sighted: Their numbers are already predicted to drop by about 70 percent in 40 years due to climate change.

Yet when the U.S. proposed granting the highest protection under CITES—which would have stopped international trade in polar bear parts—you could have heard a pin drop. Support from at least one other country with polar bears was essential, but Canada launched an attack on the proposal. Greenland pressured Denmark to oppose it. Norway claimed the time wasn't right. And Russia swayed between support and opposition seemingly every day.

Though we had done everything we could, even bringing the European Parliament and European Commission to our side, we knew we were in trouble. The two bodies don't hold as much sway as we would have liked, and the EU has a complicated way of finalizing positions. Just days before the meeting, the EU decided to oppose the proposal. We soon learned that there was no consensus among its 27 nations, but our attempts to speak with its lead country, Spain, were rebuffed. Without any dialogue, how

could we even begin to present counterarguments?

Though we attempted to further negotiate by proposing a quota of zero for international commercial trade in polar bear skins—a more politically acceptable measure that could still leave room for import and export of trophies—we could not bring the fight back to life.

But in continuing the struggle months after the 2010 convention has ended, I remember that it's essential to take the long view. I have often been called the “mother” of the Species Survival Network because in the beginning, it required a lot of nurturing. I laugh now to think that our collaboration began before the age of the Web, before most people had e-mail, before you could have a phone call with more than three people at a time. It was when international calls cost an arm and a leg. It was when documents had to be photocopied and mailed. And yet, there we were, determined to network despite these barriers.

As a result, we have many successes to celebrate: protections for American box turtles in 1994; yellow-naped Amazon parrots and Asian freshwater turtles in 2002; Irrawaddy dolphins and yellow-crested cockatoos in 2004; and slow loris, Cuvier's gazelles, and the European eel in 2007,

among many others. At the end of each meeting, rather than wallowing in sadness or frustration about things we've failed to achieve, we have to pick ourselves up and develop new strategies. Reaching our goals often takes years, and even then, our efforts must be shored up repeatedly.

A good example of the need for persistence is our pushback against the relentless ivory traders. Despite a 1989 CITES decision giving elephants critical protections, some countries have been allowed to sell huge quantities of government-stocked ivory—stimulating market demand and encouraging more poaching.

We scored a significant defeat of this practice when, at the 2010 meeting, Zambia and Tanzania's proposals to sell their ivory were voted down. We'll surely face off with these countries in the future. And with the next CITES meeting only two and a half years away in Thailand, there is no time to rest. Until then, we are not letting the trade in polar bear skins, shark fins, Atlantic bluefin tuna, red and pink coral, or other species continue unopposed; there are more ways to curtail or end their trade, and we are pursuing them. As we race against the clock of diminishing habitat and global climate change, I can only hope we won't be too late. ■

► SPECIES SNAPSHOT : TREE FROGS

In the past decade, the U.S. alone has imported more than 220,000 *Agalychnis* tree frogs. Thanks to the Species Survival Network, the five species are now listed on CITES Appendix II, which requires countries to ensure that an export is not detrimental to species survival, that the animals have been legally acquired, and that transport is humane. Most countries with tree frogs already prohibit their capture and transport for the pet trade, but the new protections will bring a higher level of scrutiny to shipments and save thousands each year.

They live quietly by day, camouflaging their colorful sides until they resemble lumps on leaves. They die without a trace, their thin-skinned, watery bodies decomposing within hours and destroying the evidence of their demise.

Tree frogs can be hard to observe in the wild, but when the rains come and breeding season begins, these ephemeral creatures make their performance debut in local water sources. The singing and dancing, intended for potential mates, can attract the wrong crowd: collectors for the pet trade.

Before the Santa Ana volcano erupted in El Salvador five years ago and blanketed the surrounding area in ash, herpetologist Twan Leenders had watched black-eyed (or Morelet's) tree frogs turn a ranger station's rainwater collection area into their watering hole. "That's probably the only sustainable body of water for many, many miles, so all the frogs that rely on that kind of habitat for breeding will move over there," he says. "If you're out there at the right time of year and you go out at night and it just rains a little bit, you can see them by the dozens." Such predictable behavior makes frogs an easy target, he says; one collector can wipe out a single population.

Now with the Connecticut Audubon Society, Leenders has spent much of his career researching the habitat needs of rare species. For at least 13 years, he lived largely out of a backpack in Central America. He still returns to check on the status of certain animals, including a species of harlequin toad that was once fairly common in Costa Rica and Panama but is now isolated to a single stream valley. "I've managed to identify 34 individuals," says Leenders. "And we're looking at a little toad that's maybe an inch long. ... So you can put the entire world's population end to end, [and] you've got about a yard of them left."

Worldwide, amphibians are being decimated by chytridiomycosis, a fungal disease that hardens their skin and hampers their ability to exchange gases and fluids. A sobering study published in July by the National Academy of Sciences concluded that about 40 percent of amphibian species had been lost in a Panamanian park in the past decade; of 11 newly discovered species, five had already gone extinct in the area.

Based on his research, Leenders believes some species will adapt to the presence of the fungus in the environment. But the fungus probably won't disappear, he says, making it even more critical to slow the progression of other threats such as habitat destruction and the capture of wild amphibians as pets.

The new listing for *Agalychnis* tree frogs will help curb that practice by blocking importing countries from accepting unapproved shipments. And the inclusion of all five species makes it harder to mislead customs officials. "Often [tree frogs are] purposely misidentified on the import papers so that nobody gets suspicious and nobody at the borders can

identify these species," says Leenders. "If you have 500 red-eyed tree frogs and you mix in a couple of Morelet's and they're all asleep, they all look like green clumps of chewing gum."

In the tiny tree frog, Leenders sees a measure of the planet's fate. Many species of frogs spend half their lives in water as tadpoles and half on land or in trees. "They're highly sensitive organisms that give you an indication of water and air quality—of whether your entire habitat is up to par."

— Nancy Lawson



Illicit collectors have taken advantage of similarities in appearance by smuggling endangered frogs in with shipments of more prolific species, like this red-eyed tree frog. Regulating the trade in all *Agalychnis* tree frogs will help improve enforcement.