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World votes to continue trading in species on verge of extinction



African elephants remain at risk from poachers

Ben Webster, Environment Editor, and Frank Pope

Their sheer size and strength have made them among the most celebrated of endangered species, yet they have all been betrayed — by vested interests at a UN meeting on wildlife protection.

Proposals to ban trade in bluefin tuna and polar bears were overwhelmingly rejected yesterday at the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (Cites), meeting in Doha, Qatar.

A plan for a 20-year ban on ivory sales, to protect African elephants, is also likely to fail in the coming days — partly because Britain and other members of the EU are refusing to support it. Delegates are instead expected to approve a weak compromise, which would encourage poaching by allowing the sale of ivory being stored by several African nations.

Feelings were running high yesterday about the failure of measures to protect endangered tuna. Only 20 of the 120 countries at the meeting voted to ban trade in the bluefin. Intensive lobbying by Japan, which consumes 80 per cent of Atlantic and Mediterranean bluefin, meant that a snap vote was held before any debate on scientific reports that show a catastrophic decline in the largest of the tuna family.

Campaigners reacted with dismay. Oliver Knowles, of Greenpeace, said: "It is an own goal by Japan. By pushing for a few more years of this luxury product it has put the future of bluefin, and the future of its own supply, at serious risk. The abject failure of governments here at Cites to protect Atlantic bluefin tuna spells disaster for its future, and sets the species on a pathway to extinction."

France, Italy and Spain catch most of the tuna consumed by the global market. In 2009 a quota of 19,950 tonnes of tuna was set by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, but many fish are caught live in nets, transferred to farms and fattened before slaughter.

Susan Lieberman, director of international policy for the Pew Environment Group, said: "The market for this fish is just too lucrative and the pressure from fishing interests too great for enough governments to support a truly sustainable future for the fish."

The Cites process, which requires a two-thirds majority for a proposal to be adopted, is vulnerable to well-funded lobbying by countries and industries that depend on trade in a species. The vested interests exploit uncertainties in the estimates of population

numbers, and strike backroom deals to secure the votes of developing countries where endangered species are far down the list of political priorities.

A US proposal to protect polar bears fell victim to arguments put forward by Inuit groups that their livelihoods depended on hunting the animals. The vote on protecting elephants is due on Monday, and is viewed by wildlife groups as the last opportunity to protect many of Africa's most threatened herds.

The few remaining elephants in Sierra Leone were killed in October by poachers serving the thriving black market in ivory, which fetches up to \$1,500 (£980) a kilo in the Far East. In the Zakouma National Park in Chad, poaching has cut the population from 3,885 in 2006 to only 617 last year. The number of elephants lost to poaching in Kenya has quadrupled in the past two years. Kenya is one of seven African nations proposing a 20-year moratorium on sales of stockpiled ivory.

International trade in ivory was banned in 1989, but since then Cites has agreed several "one-off sales" of stockpiled ivory on condition that the proceeds were spent on elephant conservation. Britain supported a one-off sale of 105 tonnes in 2008, arguing that it would reduce poaching by satisfying demand. But Kenya says that the one-off sales have expanded the market in China and Japan for ivory ornaments, and that this in turn has encouraged poaching.

Asian-run crime syndicates are able to pass off illegal ivory as coming from stockpiles sold with Cites approval.

Tanzania and Zambia want to sell 112 tonnes of ivory, and have submitted proposals that would allow the sale to take place by reducing their elephants' level of protection under Cites trade rules.

Britain will join the rest of the EU in voting against Kenya's proposal. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said it was still considering whether to support a lowering of the Cites protection for Tanzanian and Zambian elephants.

Robbie Marsland, UK Director of the International Fund for Animal Welfare, said: "We are disappointed that the UK Government, and European Union member countries as a whole, have not gone into this meeting with a much stronger message against the ivory trade and in favour of elephant protection.

"This leaves the door open to future trade, which would result in further illegal poaching."

Nick Herbert, the Shadow Environment Secretary, said the Government should be pressing for the destruction of stockpiles of ivory. "No one proposes stockpiling seized drugs or weapons to sell for profit, and ivory should be treated in just the same way. Instead of flooding the market with more ivory and legitimising the trade these stockpiles should be destroyed. We should be choking demand for ivory, not stoking it."

A Defra spokesman said: "The UK will not consider other sales of ivory until the effects of last year's one-off sale of ivory, intended to reduce demand for illegal poached ivory, have been fully analysed. This will take at least a further six years."

A report last week by an international team of 27 scientists and conservationists concluded that previous one-off sales had contributed to a rise in poaching and failed to deliver the promised conservation benefits, resulting in "only short-term profitability to the few individuals who ran the scheme".

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