



by Ivo Vegter

*which it bears relevance and to which we are also signatories.*

*CITES in its Preamble accepted the principle of: 'Recognizing that peoples and States are and should be the best protectors of their own wild fauna and flora' and the Convention on Biological Diversity 1992 in Article 3 provides that: 'States have, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and the principles of international law, the sovereign right to exploit their own resources pursuant to their own environmental policies, and the responsibility to ensure that activities within their jurisdiction or control do not cause damage to the environment of other States or of areas beyond the limits of national jurisdiction.'*

*We contend that CITES, in form, substance and implementation, is not aligned with other international agreements of equal weight and arguably greater relevance to the challenges of today. These agreements emphasize the following principles:*

- *sovereignty over the use of national resources;*
- *inclusive, equitable development through the sustainable use of natural resources;*
- *recognizing that rural communities living with wildlife have inalienable rights over the use of their resources; and*
- *recognizing that in today's world of rapid changes in climate and land use and the accelerating pace of transformation of wildlife habitat, the survival of wildlife depends on the perceptions and development needs of people living with wildlife.*

*The way CITES is currently operating is contrary to its founding principles. Today CITES discards proven, working conservation models in favor of ideologically driven anti-use and anti-trade models. Such models are dictated by largely Western non-State actors who have no experience with, responsibility for, or ownership over wildlife resources. The result has been failure to adopt progressive, equitable, inclusive and science-based conservation strategies. We believe this failure has arisen from the domination of protectionist ideology over science decision-making within CITES.*

*This anti-sustainable use and anti-trade ideology now dominates decisions made by many States who are party to CITES. States are increasingly influenced by the dominance both at meetings of the decision-making structures of CITES and in their run-up by protectionist NGOs whose ideological position has no basis in science or experience and is not shared in any way by the Member States of SADC and their people.*

*This conservation model is based on entrenched and emotive rhetoric and discourse, backed up by intense lobbying, as opposed to science. Foremost among these motifs now dominating CITES is the unfounded belief that all trade fuels illegal, unsustainable trade, ignoring clear evidence to the*

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*contrary.*

*Examples of this are the attempts by others to impose new trade restrictions for species that are effectively conserved - and utilised - in our States, such as lions and giraffe, while the real threats in those States where such species are in decline due to habitat loss and human-wildlife conflict continue to go unattended.*

*The Southern African countries have observed, with great discomfort, the polarized discussions on African charismatic large mammals at this CoP18. It is very disturbing to see the North/South divide across the African continent rearing its head again.*

*We are further concerned that positions of some Parties appear to be based on national political considerations aimed at catering to the interests of national, intensively lobbied constituencies, as opposed to proven, science-based conservation strategies. This undermines the SADC States, on whom the responsibility to manage species falls, and our ability to do so effectively. As it is currently implemented, CITES undermines the rights of people living in rural areas of SADC States to have access to and use in a sustainable manner the natural resources present in their communities that are required to enjoy adequate living conditions and the right to participate in the management of these resources. The consensus expressed through CITES by the majority of States undermines our region in our efforts to secure social and environment justice through the sustainable use of our natural resources. In doing so it is compromising our ability to meet obligations and responsibilities to other multilateral agreements and to our peoples.*

*The populations of iconic African wildlife species in our region illustrate the effectiveness of our conservation models. Similar examples of successful conservation outcomes have not been forthcoming under ideologically driven approaches to conservation. Yet, at previous meetings of the Conference of the Parties to CITES, efforts made by us to advance and strengthen the same conservation strategies that have worked so well have been rejected.*

*Those who bear no cost of protecting our wildlife, nor bear any consequence for decisions of CITES on our species, vote without any accountability against working conservation models in southern Africa. To this end, we have had to invoke measures such as announcing a dispute, the first time ever in CITES. As members of the global community, we fully appreciate the importance of multilateral negotiations, such as those that take place within CITES, in identifying and collectively working towards solutions for the greater good of humanity.*

*We have been committed Parties to CITES since its inception or our accession to it and would wish to remain so. But we can no longer ignore these glaring shortcomings and threats to our national interests and to our commitments to the broader multilateral context. Mr Chairman, the time has come to seriously reconsider whether there are any meaningful benefits from our membership to CITES. I thank you.*

*A threat to leave CITES—a move for which I have advocated in the past—is no small thing. It will have very significant consequences, such as the possibility that remaining member countries simply refuse to*

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trade with non-members, especially in products derived from wildlife ranching and conservation.

But, heavily influenced by Western environmentalists and animal rights ideologues, the CITES countries have consistently interfered with the sovereign right of developing countries to manage the conservation of their wild ecosystems in such a way that their conservation or development also benefits their own people.

Rich countries do so because it plays well with their political constituencies at home, and many poor countries vote alongside them because millions of dollars in conservation funding and other aid from large environmental groups are dependent upon meek compliance. This leaves the few countries that actually do have charismatic megafauna to protect without enough votes to protect their own national interests.

As Ed Stoddard recently put it in *Daily Maverick*, “fresh thinking is clearly needed” to resolve the “megafauna stalemate”. To do this, “focusing on communities is key,” according to Duan Biggs, senior research fellow for social-ecological systems and resilience at Griffith University, and Matthew H. Holden, lecturer in the Centre for Applications in Natural Resource Mathematics at the University of Queensland, writing in *The Conversation*.

Conservation does not emerge from foreigners dictating to developing countries how to manage their natural resources, or prohibiting them from the sustainable utilization of nature and wildlife. Sustainable use is a key principle that CITES once promoted, but has long since abandoned in favor of a preservationist ideology promoted by green lobby groups and politicians pandering to their rich-world constituencies.

[It is high time] that the developed world rejects the preservationist ideology of Western environmentalists and demands a return to conservation based on sustainable use that still, on paper, forms the basis for global conservation and biodiversity treaties. Any conservation policy that does not take into account the needs of local communities and domestic economies is doomed to failure.

Preserving an imagined Eden for the satisfaction of rich-world elites, at the cost of the socio-economic development of people in poor countries, is morally reprehensible and politically unworkable.

The developing world does not need, and its people are refusing to accept, patronizing instructions on conservation and conditional offers of “aid” from what one can only call eco-colonialists. Developing countries must put their own people and development first, and pursue home-grown sustainable use policies that have proved to be successful in the past, global opinion be damned.

*Ivo Vegter is a columnist and the author of Extreme Environment, a book on environmental exaggeration and how it harms emerging economies. He writes on this and many other matters, from the perspective of individual liberty and free markets. Many of Ivo's articles are featured in the Conservation Frontlines Library. For space reasons this article was shortened, leaving out Ivo's analysis of the burning forests in the Amazon. It is republished here with permission of DM and the author. You can read the full article as it was first published by The Daily Maverick.*

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*Banner Image: CITES Protected Species.*