

## **CITES and its failure to take action**

Last week the 16<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Parties to CITES came to an end and the question on everyone's lips is; what measures did they take to protect elephants?

At the beginning of the conference, the idealists among us may have looked for an extension to the existing ban on ivory and beyond that a total ban on all ivory sales. A situation that at the very least, would remove any and all confusion around the sale of ivory, it would be illegal. The realists might have been looking for delegates to stand up and call for immediate international funds to enhance security at transit ports from where ivory is being smuggled. They may also have expected a commitment from CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) to categorically state that their ivory trading mechanism has been a shambolic failure, noting that since the 'two' CITES approved so called 'one-off' sales of ivory in 1997 and 2008 there has been a measured increase in elephant poaching to fuel the ivory trade. Such an admission would have provided an opportunity for CITES to address the situation by extending the ban and implementing punishments on those countries deemed to be failing in their ability to halt the illegal export of ivory from their borders and those failing to monitor and act upon the sale of illegal ivory.

It is always disappointing when even the realistic outcomes are not met, for at a time when elephants are being killed for their tusks at their worst levels since before the 1989 ban, CITES has failed to act with vigour.

It is not all bad news, and we should draw encouragement from the new regulation into DNA testing of seized ivory. All seizures weighing at least 500kg must be collected and submitted to an appropriate forensic facility where they will be DNA tested to source their origin – if implemented well, this will help identify poaching hotspots.

There was also a particular focus on the importance of a worldwide database monitoring all seized ivory along with an annual report from Parties around the world, reporting on their government-held stockpiles. CITES have warned there must be significant progress by July 2014, when the current state of the African Elephant and the ivory trade will again be reviewed. However, that is 16 months away, and given the current levels of poaching, we could witness the death of another 35,000 elephants during that timeframe!

This timeframe is directed mainly towards the 'Gang of Eight', a list selected by CITES as the 8 nations who need to be doing more to tackle the illegal ivory trade through stricter sentences and tougher laws. The conference identified Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda as well as transit countries Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam, and top markets China and Thailand as making insufficient efforts to curb the trade. There is no doubt that these countries, and others, need to do more to tighten their ports or monitor ivory sales. However CITES have not offered a plan into how they can help support the 'Gang of Eight' throughout their efforts, they have merely pointed a finger of blame. This is counter-productive, as it risks alienating Nations such as Kenya who have been taking proactive steps to address port security and wildlife security at a field level.

Much has been made of the statement by Thai Prime Minister, Yingluck Shinawatra at the opening of CITES, where she pledged to end Thailand's extensive illegal ivory trade - a positive and encouraging step; yet there is no timetable for this ban. It is also globally accepted that China is the single largest ivory consuming Nation in the world, with an

extensive and well documented legal and illegal ivory trade. Until pressure is brought to bear on China and those selling illegal ivory are arrested for their crime and brought to trial, with strong sentences, the future of elephants will be in the balance.

All are agreed that there is no quick fix to the ivory poaching crises, however our ability to protect and conserve elephants for the future is dramatically hindered by the failure of CITES to admit the extent of the problem and take direct action to protect the species. Instead, CITES has ended with a feeling that they have chosen to shy away from the always controversial topic of elephants and ivory, for fear of the stresses it risks exerting on relationships between countries. So again we are left waiting and wondering if and what it will take for this international body to actually act in the interests of the species and not merely those of trade.

In the lead up to CoP16, the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust (DSWT) launched the iWorry campaign – it has a singular message – say NO to ivory. We called on people to sign a petition to this effect, which was presented to John Scanlon, Secretary General to CITES, during CoP16. We are grateful to our friends at the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) for ensuring that the petition, with in excess of 40,000 signatures was placed into the hands of Mr Scanlon. A statement to him from us, and all the signatories, that the world is watching and expecting action to protect elephants. Action that has not been forthcoming from CITES and so, as we reflect on what has been a disappointing CoP for a number of key species, we are left with no doubt that non-governmental organisations like the DSWT must keep up the fight for elephants.

Our Anti-Poaching Teams, supported by our Aerial Surveillance Units will be working tirelessly to protect elephants at a field level, working ever more closely with the Kenya Wildlife Service. Our Mobile Veterinary Units, which number three as of January 2013, will bring essential and often lifesaving aid to injured wild animals in the field. While through collaborations with other NGOs, local people and the Kenya Forest Service we will impart more programmes to secure wildlife habitats and ensure there are well protected areas in which elephants and other wild species can roam. All the time we will ensure we are on-hand to answer the call to rescue any orphan infant elephant, so that it might be afforded a second chance.

Alongside our field operations, through our iWorry campaign, we will be mounting the pressure on governments to act in the interests of wildlife. Working with other NGOs, plans will be put in place to organise mass demonstrations at Embassies around the world, calling for key countries to act for elephants before it is too late. Video and social media will be used to reach out to people in ivory consumer countries and inform them as to the stark truth behind every piece of ivory and that any person that buys ivory has blood on their hands.

CITES may have failed the elephant at this meeting, but we the people have it in our power to come together and fight for this intelligent, gentle and social mammal. There is hope and with your support we can still save the species.