

COP 13

Conservation TRIBUNE

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Those Quiet Americans!

The disproportionately high number of participants from the United States at COP13 contrasts starkly with the small number of species proposals under consideration that relate to American flora and fauna. So why are so many Americans driving CITES policies?

The primary reason is that many of the advocacy groups in Bangkok for COP13 are either American or international organizations with a strong association with the United States. The U.S. federal tax code encourages the proliferation of advocacy groups because it exempts them from paying taxes (subject to certain conditions) and also allows Americans to deduct their donations from annual tax filings.

More importantly, the U.S. tax system also encourages the existence of wealthy foundations that, themselves, gain tax advantages when they donate money to advocacy groups. So the NGOs have a built-in and permanent flow of cash with which to pay the salaries of ever larger numbers of staff.

In addition to lobbying directly at CITES meetings, these groups exercise considerable influence over the U.S. approach to managing species, both within the domestic system – which is overwhelmed by NGO lawsuits – and from an international perspective. The basic strategy is to first establish a law in the U.S., such as the prospective ban on importing beluga sturgeon

products, and then harness it with American power and influence to extend the policy internationally through organizations like CITES.

Procedures in the U.S. for public consultation have become, in effect, forums for advocacy groups to promote their agendas. Congressional hearings that helped establish U.S. negotiating positions at COP 13 were dominated by protectionist NGOs. U.S. officials are under constant pressure to subvert science with NGO preferences.

The U.S. delegation inevitably draws enormous authority from the country's sheer size and power. In short, it seems to some that the United States can do what it chooses.

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U.S. wildlife hegemony can manifest itself in constructive and destructive ways. For example, U.S. enforcement officials absurdly complain that they cannot distinguish live coral rock from other coral rock, creating huge problems for the aquatics industry. And, following the lead of NGOs, the U.S. maintains a procedural and non-scientific basis for keeping ultra-abundant minke whales on Appendix I, ostensibly because this issue should be dealt with first by the highly dysfunctional and incurably politicized International Whaling Commission. Such

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charismatic fauna is on the brink of extinction.

Whether or not species proposals have any impact on the United States, it seems that Americans will continue to be the most influential group setting international policies at CITES. As primary consumers of wildlife, this may be no bad thing. But given the dominance of protectionist thinking to wildlife management within the United States political system, underwritten by hundreds of millions of tax-free dollars, this may not be the most hopeful set of circumstances for relatively poor countries whose citizens often rely on trade in wildlife resources – and a few dollars per week – merely to survive. □

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IWMC Mission

To promote Sustainable Use of wild resources - terrestrial and aquatic - as a conservation mechanism.

To re-establish the fundamental link between all components of nature, including man.

To develop better understanding, respect and tolerance towards cultures and values of all nations and social groups in their relation with nature.

To protect the Sovereign Rights of Independent States in their conservation efforts

CONSERVATION TRIBUNE

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