

CITES Parties Must Decide: Are we Fish, Flesh or Fowl...

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At the opening session of the 2023 Animals Committee meeting in Geneva on 19 June, a most obvious and long-standing fact was again expressed by Secretary General, Ivonne Higuero. At about 10 min 15 sec into the YouTube recording ([\(6\) 32nd Meeting of the CITES Animals Committee - Morning \(June 20\) - YouTube](#)) of the meeting she states “and my colleagues have worked hard and spent long hours preparing for this meeting” and just thereafter “the workload has been steadily increasing through the years yet we remain a very small secretariat”. It is essential to hear this statement in the context of the CITES Aim; **to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten the survival of the species**. Consider too the Secretariat’s statement, which should determine priorities. They say that “**by 2030 all international trade in wild fauna and flora is legal, sustainable and consistent with long-term conservation of species**”.

One wonders how, in a convention so flush with “people of science”, there could be such a deviance from the core business of CITES as the one promoted, pushed and prioritised by parties such as Israel (strongly supported by observer organisations such as Born Free and Wildlife Conservation Society) towards embracing the so-called “**role of CITES in reducing risk of future zoonotic disease emergence associated with international wildlife trade**”! With existing international organisations such as the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH, formerly OIE), the World Health Organization (WHO), World Trade Organisation (WTO) and other far more appropriate entities, why on earth, and at what cost to wildlife conservation, should CITES determine that it has a leading role (or any role) to play in this arena, other than to hear and take note of anything emanating from these aforementioned organisations?

The reason is clear though. Certain parties, robustly supported by many of the well donor-funded animal-rightist and/or anti-sustainable use observer members, seize any and every opportunity to thwart any form of trade of fauna regardless of how sustainable, beneficial and benign. No crisis is, for them, to be lost as an ideal opportunity to push their nefarious agenda. The Covid pandemic of late 2019 onwards was a gift they wish to see keep on giving. They must be seriously concerned that science and logic are so rapidly now emerging, breaking down the myths and stupefying so many of the actions globally embraced, as new light is shed weekly on our collective gullibility and misguided acceptance of enforcements, where the “cure” is patently becoming more devastating than the illness ever was.

Let’s unpack pertinent facts. It matters not whether you buy into the wet-market theory, or consider the (ever more favoured) lab-leak one to be the cause. Either way, not a single thing CITES, or for that matter the WOAH, WHO or any other entity, could have done would have prevented the outcome. Wet markets and scientific laboratories ARE a matter of internal, sovereign governance and CITES



(rightly so) has absolutely no mandate in this arena and it never should (no matter how the anti-utilisation lobby at CITES campaign otherwise). Any CITES party representative who argues otherwise cannot possibly have the true mandate of his/her foreign policy department, as this flies in the face of all inter-governmental norms which always prioritise sovereignty.

But more importantly, once the genie was out of the bottle and the pathogen present within humankind, it was NEVER going to be trade in any animal, wild or domestic, alive or dead, which turned it into a pandemic. The jump (most likely mostly for reasons we may never know first from Wuhan to Northern Italy and then elsewhere) was through the transit of PEOPLE, not animals. CITES has no mandate to determine human transit.

More importantly however, is that CITES can (again rightly so) only determine certain narrow parameters and only for a tiny fraction of earth's many species. Going beyond the recent SARS Cov2 pandemic, a review of every pandemic historically on record would result in the same outcome; **nothing** that CITES could regulate would have made any difference.

Rats, fleas, camels, bats, palm civets, racoon dogs, poultry and swine generally do not fall under the purview of CITES. They either don't meet the listing criteria or are not traded across international borders to any great degree formally, if at all. And although these remain the main vector species of zoonosis, **IN EVERY PANDEMIC EVENT** since the Athenian Plague of 430BC it has been the movement or living conditions **OF PEOPLE**, mostly exacerbated by war, conquest and latterly business/recreational travel, which has spread pandemic. There is absolutely no scientific hypothesis which can honestly argue that wildlife trade poses any degree of risk sufficient enough for CITES to redirect its scarce resources, whether human or financial, to this issue. It would act against the interests of conservation, as a deflection of attention, and become a provocative and divisive side issue.

PC26/AC32 Doc 10 runs to a staggering 188 pages, and this is just the start. Spread amongst the Secretariat and the officials/staff of participating parties and NGOs, just how much time, acumen and funding that could and should flow to the core CITES mandate will be wasted? CITES deals with approximately 6600 species of animals out of an estimated total of about 7 770 000 (Mora et al 2011) Of course, the vast majority of all human/animal interactions are within national borders and involve domesticated species. Given that the zoonotic jump happens locally, and it is human movement which spreads it, how on earth could CITES, with sway of just 0,08% of global species and then only when these are traded across international boundaries, have any meaningful effect whatsoever?

The Sustainable Use Coalition - Southern Africa recognises that people remain traumatised by the recent pandemic, but this trauma was certainly magnified by the now obvious flaws in the various desperate attempts to manage it. Certainly, early hard lockdowns would have flattened the trajectory curve and helped better prepare for what was to come. But the bare truth, rapidly emerging now, is that the very implementors of much of the excessive and prolonged hardships did themselves totally flaunt, no doubt through their own realisation of the futility of much of it, their very own rules. It is



disingenuous in the extreme for those fearmongering zealots who will not let this fear and ignorance go, to expect wildlife conservation and the millions of rural people who rely on natural and renewable resources to pay the price of that fear or dogma. Worse perhaps, because they are fully aware of the futility of this exercise within CITES but won't let a good crisis go to waste, is they deliberately push this subject knowing it will create opportunity to frustrate and stymie legitimate wildlife trade as more red tape, costs and frustrations are thrust upon those who are reliant on it. And this, after all, is their sole intent at CITES.

It is time for true scientists, all clear-thinking party representatives and in particular the CITES Secretariat to speak candidly and robustly about the true CITES mandate. Officials must resist the traditional habit of welcoming red tape for the sheer sake of job security. Shedding unnecessary and distracting side-shows is crucial if CITES is going to steer true to its correct course in time to really save species from their proven threats. STOP this waste and focus on the core function. What is the original Strategic Objective of The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora? The name says it all...

