

Report on inaugural CGYN Youth Leadership Program- Singapore

Addressed to: SuCo-SA & IWMC World Conservation Trust

30 April 2024

Going into this meeting, I was a bit nervous. I did not know what to expect. Would I be uncomfortable as someone representing sustainable use? Would this conference result in a radical anti-trade movement? Would people avoid me once they found out about my work as a professional hunter? These were the thoughts troubling my head as I made the long journey to south-east Asia.

Upon arrival, I was greeted by one of the friendly Singaporean volunteers tasked with gathering us as we landed. It did not take long for the conversations to begin amongst the 41 youth delegates representing 31 different countries. Average ages ranged from 21 to around 28 years, most with degrees ranging from Bachelors through to PhD level, the majority employed within their country's relevant CITES authority.

Monday, 22 April: We went into brain storming sessions to formulate the CGYN vision and mission statements. The session began after welcoming addresses by the CEO of the National Parks Board of Singapore, Ms Hwang Yu-Ning and CITES Secretary General, Ms Ivonne Higuero.

We were divided into groups of 5 to 8 as we discussed and highlighted our various points that we wanted included in the vision and mission statements. With the help of facilitators, we then consolidated our ideas into one vision and one mission statement per group. There were many similarities across all the groups.

The rest of the day involved discussing the 'mock COP' that we would be participating in on day three. All delegates representing their respective governments were grouped together and formed around eleven fantasy countries. Five delegates representing NGOs, of which I was one, could choose to work together or separately. In the interest of time, we chose to work together as one coalition.



Left: Explaining my group's vision & mission statements.



Right: Observer parties discussing interventions for Mock COP.

Tuesday, 23 April: We had a tour of the Centre for Wildlife Forensics and Centre for Wildlife Rehabilitation before moving over to the Singapore Zoo for an "Amazing Race" fun activity. It was fascinating to see the research and innovation that the

Singaporeans have at their Centre for Wildlife Forensics. Singapore is often a transit country for illegal wildlife products destined for the rest of Asia.

Wednesday, 24 April: In the morning it was time for our mock COP which, although, was not run perfectly as pointed out by Ms Higuero, was still very impressive. Apart from a few technical mistakes made with regards to voting, it felt like the real thing in terms of the general conduct and processes. The purpose of this mock COP (also referred to as Conference of the Parties- Youth, or COPY) was to get a sense of how a Conference of the Parties works and to essentially practice for it. We debated two agenda items, namely the CITES strategic vision as well as a proposal to up-list both the long and short-fin mako shark species onto appendix 2. Both of these were actual CITES documents from previous COPs. I was quite surprised that I and my fellow observer party members all agreed NOT to up-list the species as the documents available did not point towards international trade as being a major threat. The end result was for the up-listing to take place, as most of the fantasy parties decided on that.



Above: Giving an intervention on behalf of IWMC, TRAFFIC, Birdlife International, and GYBN during the Mock COP

In the afternoon we workshopped and brainstormed our pillars for CGYN. This followed a similar process to the formation of our vision and mission statements. After much discussion, we agreed on four pillars, and a fifth one which still needed some tweaking. The four that we all agreed on were 'capacity building', 'research & innovation', 'networking & collaboration', and 'CEPA' (communication, education, public awareness). I would have preferred 'active participation' over CEPA as the acronym can be confused with other existing entities. The fifth pillar which requires

more work is 'passion & commitment'. The reason is that it is very difficult to action and measure our passion and commitment, according to the facilitators.

That evening was our cultural night with a panel discussion facilitated by CGYN co-founded Steffi Tan. Our panellists were Ms Ivonne Higuero and Ms Desmond Lee (Singapore's Minister for National Development, and Minister-in-charge of Social Services integration), then joining us via zoom were Ms Sarah Bagnall (Senior International Advisor, Dept of Conservation, New Zealand), and Ms Carolina Caceres (Director, International Biodiversity at Environment & Climate Change, Canada).

I posed the following question to the panel; *Can the CITES voting system (1 country, 1 vote) not be seen as unfair at times, given that a group of parties who are not range states of a particular species can greatly influence the up-listing/down-listing of a species that does not occur in their region without facing any of the consequences from that outcome- and in many instances they may know very little about the species and its circumstances?*

Ms Caceres answered and Mr Lee added to the response. I think the question was answered honestly and fairly. Ms Caceres essentially concluded that the system is not necessarily unfair, but greater effort is required to ensure that parties are making informed decisions. Hence, greater attempts are required for the various countries to learn more about the complex wildlife management, and trade issues from across the globe. Mr Lee added by saying that Singapore were easily able to gain the support that they required to list two bird species native to the region, essentially pointing out that with prior planning and collaboration, it should be possible for most countries to get the result they require. Personally, I think that is not the simple solution for Africa given how divided west and southern Africa is, for example. I also believe, that it will generally be easier for a country to gain support for an up-listing rather than for a down-listing.



Above: Asking my question to the panel.

The cultural evening was also an opportunity for us to share some snacks from our home countries; *biltong, droë wors, and koeksisters* were a big hit! I even had vegan koeksisters which was greatly appreciated by those who don't eat meat.

Thursday, 25 April: This short day was used to wrap up our roadmap and action plans. This was very important because with action plans, actual work can begin. The SuCo-SA offer to host CGYN members on an ongoing basis to showcase our wildlife industry was well-received, and now all eyes turn to South Africa! It was even suggested by one or two members that the next CGYN Youth Leadership Program be hosted in South Africa next year. Under the capacity building pillar, I have indicated my intention to help facilitate global tours for CGYN members to gain insight into the legal and sustainable wildlife utilisation models from all across the globe, starting with South Africa.



Above: Explaining the SuCo-SA offer to the capacity building working group.

Conclusion: I think that this meeting went as well as it possibly could have. I never felt uncomfortable, and I was overwhelmed by how everybody was willing to listen and entertain opposing views. The youth of CITES clearly have an intention to learn and understand the complexities of wildlife trade and human needs, before drawing conclusions.

Thank you, SuCo-SA and IWMC, for entrusting me with this task. It was one of the highlights of my young career! Often, on leaving a COP, one wonders whether we can ever achieve much, but experiencing the appetite for truth and knowledge from these delegates, the future CITES leadership, it is up to us to engage robustly, transparently and with integrity.

Yours Sincerely
Christopher Palos