

Recent Topics on CITES Related to Asian Elephants in Particular

Masayuki Sakamoto

Japan Tiger and Elephant Fund, Tokyo, Japan

Author's e-mail: yukisakamoto@jtcf.jp

Background

Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*) have been listed in Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) since 1975 when the treaty came into effect. The listing prohibits the commercial international trade in individuals, parts and derivatives of the species listed.

The focus of CITES regarding the ivory trade has primarily been on African elephants (*Loxodonta africana*) since the enormous upsurge of poaching emerged in the late 1970s. After a fruitless attempt to limit the volume of exported ivory by a quota system, the 7th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to CITES (CoP 7) in Lausanne up-listed all populations of African elephants from Appendix II to I in 1989 and prohibited commercial import/export of them including ivory.

The twenty years following the ban (1990s – 2000s) can be described as a period of political jostling for either lifting or retaining the ban. Japan was a major player for ending the ban and has significantly contributed to maintaining the active international ivory market. During the period, despite the ban, Japan imported 89 tons of raw ivory (in 1999 and 2009), and China imported 62 tons as well (in 2008) through the exemption provided by “one-off sale.”

When the first one-off sale exclusively for Japan was conditionally endorsed at CoP 10 in 1997 (Harare), ‘Monitoring The Illegal Killing of Elephants’ (MIKE) and The Elephant Trade Information System (ETIS) were established for the purpose of monitoring the effect of these one-off sales. Those programs targeted poaching and illegal trade in ivory and other elephant

specimens of not only African but also Asian elephants. ETIS collects and analyzes the seizure data provided from each Party to CITES.

Nonetheless, implementation of MIKE with regard to Asian elephants has been far less active compared to that on African elephants. In the late 2000’s, Japan passed the torch of top-consumer country to China.

In 2013, CITES finally recognized the resurgence of poaching of African elephants, which was later found to have increased since 2006. Consequently the National Ivory Action Plan (NIAP) process was introduced to secure the compliance for the resolution regarding trade in elephants (“Resolution Conf. 10.10”). The total number of Parties that have participated in the NIAP process is 27, which includes 7 Asian elephant range states (Cambodia, China, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam) as of December 2016.

It is assumed that the NIAP process should reduce the poaching and illegal trade in ivory of African elephants by securing the compliance of CITES Resolution Conf. 10.10 in range, transit and consumer countries of ivory. However the plan also should have included the protection of Asian elephants against poaching and illegal trade in ivory.

Most recently, at CoP 17 in 2016 (Johannesburg) an amendment to Resolution Conf. 10.10 was adopted, that all Parties and non-Parties in whose jurisdiction a legal domestic market for ivory that contributes to poaching or illegal trade exists, should close the markets.

Apart from ivory trade, the live elephant trade issue was raised at CoP16 in 2013 (Bangkok)

and a related recommendation was inserted in Resolution Conf. 10.10. The main focus was on the export of live African elephants from Zimbabwe to China at the time.

Concerns were expressed that illegal trade in live Asian elephants might be increasing during the 65th meeting of the CITES Standing Committee in 2014. Subsequently, the CITES Secretariat compiled a status report on illegal trade in live Asian elephants, and presented it at CoP 17 in 2016. The report confirmed that illegal trade in live Asian elephants takes place, which was perceived as being low, while actual estimations of illegal trade were not available because effective monitoring particularly in border areas, was largely beyond the capacity of law enforcement. The report also revealed that poaching for skin and trunks had increased.

Based on such findings, a number of decisions concerning Asian elephants were adopted, including encouraging the Parties to undertake investigations into the illegal trade in live Asian elephants, collaborate in the development and application of a regional system for registering and marking and tracing live Asian elephants. The Secretariat was mandated at CoP17 to incorporate information provided by range states, together with other findings and recommendations concerning trade in live Asian elephants, into its regular reporting to the CITES Standing Committee on the implementation of Resolution Conf. 10.10.

Resolution Conf. 10.10 (revised most recently in 2016 CoP 17) is the basis for the interpretation regarding trade in elephant specimens including implementation and enforcement of international trade control, management of ivory stockpiles, NIAP, MIKE and ETIS. The resolution also directs the Secretariat to invite the IUCN Species Survival Commission (IUCN/SSC) African and Asian Elephant Specialist Groups to submit any new and relevant information on the conservation status of elephants; pertinent conservation actions and management strategies; and to recommend actions on the basis of that information for consideration by CoP and Standing Committee.

Topics reported / decided at the 69th meeting of the Standing Committee to CITES (Geneva, 27 November – 1 December 2017)

Conservation status of Asian elephants

The 13 range states of Asian elephants hold a current population estimated as 44,281 to 49,731 elephants. The cases of poaching and illegal capture of Asian elephants may have increased over the years in a few countries. Large numbers of captive elephants exist in range states, with an estimated population of approximately 15,000 elephants.

MIKE

An analysis of MIKE data for Asian elephants showed a steady increase in average levels of illegal killing of elephants between 2003 and 2006, followed by a decreasing trend up to 2008. The mean PIKE (Proportion of Illegally Killed Elephants) values from 2008 to 2013 remained relatively flat but seemed to take an upward turn thereafter. It is important to note that the illegally killed elephants include elephants killed in conflict situations, which account for a substantial proportion of the total. For instance, 40% of the illegally killed elephants reported between 2007 and 2013 were females, which do not carry ivory.

NIAP of the range states of Asian elephants

The Standing Committee commended China, Hong Kong SAR of China, and Thailand for the measures taken based on their NIAPs, and



encouraged them to submit a report on any future development at the next Committee while it requested Malaysia and Vietnam to revise and update their NIAPs. Sri Lanka was newly added to the list of possible participants in the NIAP process, however the Committee agreed not to include it at present.

On the other hand, the Committee agreed an overall rating of limited progress of implementation of the NIAPs of Cambodia and Lao PDR, and a serious concern was directed to the former. The Committee requested the Secretariat to conduct a technical mission to Cambodia for assessing its implementation of NIAP. If it does not show any demonstrable progress by the next Committee meeting in October 2018, a recommendation to suspend all commercial trade in CITES-listed species with Cambodia is to be adopted.

Live elephant trade

While the Secretariat only provided the outcome of the second Asian elephant range states' meeting in Jakarta in April 2017, it showed an analysis

of the problem and the expected solution. That is, the lack of a standardized captive elephant registration system seems to have provided cover for illicit trade in live Asian elephants and their body parts, including ivory. This needs to be addressed through appropriate registration systems, monitoring protocols for captive populations, and improved trans-boundary cooperation. At their meeting in 2017, the range states recognized the need to have a standardized elephant registration process (which is currently lacking), including DNA registration; guidelines for the management and welfare of captive elephants; disease management (including zoonotic diseases); training and capacity-building of staff and mahouts; and specific national policies to manage captive elephant populations.

But, the solutions suggested were the same as those suggested at CoP 17 in 2016 last year, and there were no suggestions on how to realize them. It seems that a systematic approach, for example using the NIAP process for not only ivory trade issue but also live elephant trade issue, may be required.



Collared elephant “Tara Devi” and her newborn baby (<2 days old) in Minneriya National Park, Sri Lanka (Photo by Jennifer Pastorini).