

CONVENTION ON INTERNATIONAL TRADE IN ENDANGERED SPECIES
OF WILD FAUNA AND FLORA



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Geneva (Switzerland), 7-11 July 2014

Interpretation and implementation of the Convention

Species trade and conservation

Elephants

REPORTING ON TRADE IN AND REGISTRATION OF LIVE ASIAN ELEPHANTS

1. This document has been submitted by Greece on behalf of the European Union and its 28 Member States¹. A draft version of this document has been shared with all range Asian elephants States electronically on 15 April 2014 and comments were received from the authorities of Malaysia, China and Laos.

Background

2. The Asian elephant has been listed on CITES Appendix 1 since 1975, and all Asian elephant range states are members of CITES. The 2008 IUCN Red List assesses the Asian elephant to be endangered with a decreasing population. Exact population estimates vary but it is believed that there are fewer than 42,000 Asian elephants, with over half this total found in India.
3. An illegal trade in live wild-caught Asian elephants occurs within and between a number of Asian elephant range states; specifically China/Myanmar/Thailand, and India/Nepal². Whilst habitat loss, degradation and fragmentation are acknowledged as the primary threats to the Asian elephant this illegal trade is a significant threat to remaining populations.
4. With the rapid growth of tourism and demand for Asian elephants in entertainment, there are strong incentives to capture and trade live individuals taken from the wild. Calves are particularly desirable as they have greater appeal to tourists and generate the most revenue, as well as being easier to train. The current market value for a healthy elephant calf in Thailand is as much as US\$ 33,500, representing a three to fourfold increase in the value of elephants over a 15 year period.³ Their capture often results in the killing of their mothers and other family members. Once taken, calves are subjected to a breaking-in process which includes being tied up, confined and beaten in order to break their spirits.⁴
5. It is estimated that at least 50-100 calves and young females that survive this are being traded illegally across the Thai-Myanmar border every year to supply tourist camps. There are 1,000 – 3,500 wild elephants remaining in Thailand and an estimated 3,000 in captivity. Myanmar is believed to be one of the last strongholds for the species, although population estimates vary from fewer than 2,000 to 5,000 individuals (Leimgruber et al., 2011). Considering the number of elephants that die in the process, the trade in live wild-caught elephants represents a very real threat to these remaining populations. A capture

¹ *The geographical designations employed in this document do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the CITES Secretariat or the United Nations Environment Programme concerning the legal status of any country, territory, or area, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. The responsibility for the contents of the document rests exclusively with its author.*

² SC61 Doc. 44.2 (Rev. 1) and SC62 Doc. 46.1 (Rev. 1)

³ TRAFFIC report "An Assessment of Trade in Live Elephants in Thailand"

⁴ TRAFFIC report "An Assessment of Trade in Live Elephants in Thailand"

rate of 100 elephants annually could lead to the extinction of Myanmar's wild elephant population in less than 30 years (Leimgruber *et al* 2008).

6. In 2012, Thai authorities heightened their enforcement efforts and launched a nationwide crackdown on elephant camps, confiscating 56 live elephants between 2012 and September 2013, compared to 1 between 2009 and 2011⁵.
7. There were no official reports of elephant trade along the Thai/Myanmar border after June 2012. Whilst this increased enforcement activity is to be welcomed there are however informal reports that the illegal trade continues, using alternative trade routes and holding sites. Informal reports indicate that wild-caught elephants continue to enter Thailand from Myanmar. Between April 2011 to June 2012, 26 calves were observed within five sites along the 2,000km border. In 2011, a further 24 elephants were recorded being traded at the Surin elephant festival in November, which are either known to have come from the wild or show all the visual indicators to suggest that has been the case⁶. The lack of accurate quantitative data on the illegal trade in live elephants is a significant constraint in efforts to tackle it.

Discussion

8. The 16th Conference of Parties witnessed a renewed international focus on illegal wildlife trade, in particular on elephants and rhinoceros. This has been continued in a number of forums since, including the IUCN Elephant Summit in Botswana and the London Conference on Illegal Wildlife Trade. Whilst this focus on the illegal killing of elephants in large numbers in Africa is welcome and necessary, it would be incongruous to ignore the issue of illegal trade in live elephants affecting parts of Asia.
9. The issue of illegal trade in live elephants was addressed by CITES Resolution Conf. 10.10 (Rev. CoP16) on *Trade in Elephant Specimens* which:

RECOMMENDS that all elephant range States have in place legislative, regulatory, enforcement, or other measures to prevent illegal trade in live elephants.

10. The insertion into Resolution Conf 10.10 (Rev. CoP16) of the text on illegal trade in live elephants is welcome. Whilst various measures may be already in place to help combat any illegal trade in live elephants in range countries, the text highlights that further action may help to address any problems that persist. To do so, it may, for example, be necessary for Asian elephant range countries to revisit national laws regarding captive elephants and consider the revision of those laws in order to reduce the possibility of wild taken elephants being declared as domestic.
11. Thailand's Draught Animal Act requires that all captive elephants must be legally registered by their owners before they are eight years old. This allows time for wild-caught infants to be assigned to a surrogate mother and for them to then be registered as if they had been born in captivity. Wild-caught elephants may alternatively adopt the identity papers of another that has died. The Thai Government has indicated its intention to update its legislation but to date this has not occurred, and the potential for paperwork to be forged and wild-caught calves to be absorbed into the captive population remains.
12. Strengthened legislation might also be enhanced by early registration of domestic calves following their birth and backed by a DNA database. In 2012 the Natural Resources and Environment Minister of Thailand pledged to establish a DNA database to catalogue all domestic elephants in Thailand. The aim of this was to remedy the management issues arising from the existing registration procedure, but as of September 2013 this system was not fully functioning. DNA evidence has, however, been crucial in several cases to determine the provenance of elephants in the tourism industry in Thailand. DNA profiling of all of Thailand's domestic elephants would appear to be paramount in fighting illegal trade in this species and conserving them in the wild. It would also contribute to closing existing legal loopholes. Backing up a registration system with DNA records would remove any doubt as to the origin of an elephant calf.
13. It is clear that there is limited detail about the specifics of this illegal trade and that the standardised collection of information and intelligence about the trade would help inform the need for any further action. While the latest information presented in that document relates to a large extent to the situation in Thailand and Myanmar, we believe that it is worth for the Standing Committee to also consider the issue in other

⁵ TRAFFIC report "An Assessment of Trade in Live Elephants in Thailand"

⁶ TRAFFIC report "An Assessment of Trade in Live Elephants in Thailand"

Asian elephant range States, in line with Resolution Conf. 10.10 (Rev. CoP16) on *Trade in Elephant Specimens*.

14. We recommend that the Standing Committee note the situation in relation to trade in live Asian elephants and requests the Secretariat, subject to the availability of the resources, to review the progress of Asian elephant range States in implementing Resolution Conf. 10.10 (Rev. CoP16) on *Trade in Elephant Specimens*, in particular in respect of the trade in live elephants, and to report its findings and make any recommendations for further action to the 66th meeting of the Standing Committee.