



Illegal loot. High prices for elephant ivory have fueled a new surge in poaching. These tusks were seized in Singapore.

ENDANGERED SPECIES

Elephants Take Center Ring at CITES

Africa's elephants won a 9-year reprieve at the recent meeting of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Delegates from 171 nations at the 2-week conference in The Hague, the Netherlands, dealt with trade issues affecting a host of species, including corals (see sidebar, below), rhinoceroses, tigers, and leopards. But nothing was as contentious as the debate over elephants and their ivory, which began the first day and was settled the day before the meeting's close—and then only after several cabinet-level ministers from the key African countries took over the reins from their delegates. It's the first time at a CITES meeting that such political muscle has been used to hammer out an agreement.

Although CITES banned the ivory trade in

1989, it has since agreed to list elephant populations in South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, and Zimbabwe on Appendix II, permitting controlled sales of tusks collected from elephants that died of natural causes or in culling operations and from poaching seizures. In exchange for the pause in this trade, which Kenya and Mali insisted on, the deal permits the four southern African states to sell raw ivory from stockpiles registered with their respective governments as of 31 January 2007. The exact tonnage has not yet been determined, although estimates are between 100 and 200 metric tons. This ivory will be added to an additional 60 metric tons from South Africa, Botswana, and Namibia that CITES previously approved for a one-off sale. Japan is the sole CITES-approved country for the ivory trade,

based on its import controls, although China is lobbying hard to be similarly recognized. All proceeds from the sales must be used for elephant and community-based conservation.

"Some call this a win-win," says Will Travers, president of the Species Survival Network in Washington, D.C. "But the true test will come with what happens to elephants on the ground." Adds Michael Wamithi, a wildlife biologist from the International Fund for Animal Welfare in Nairobi, Kenya, and former director of the Kenya Wildlife Service: "These two sales will put a huge amount of ivory into the Japanese market, igniting a high demand for ivory, which the legal market will be unable to sustain. That means more poaching."

Indeed, poaching and illegal ivory trade are already on the rise, say several researchers, basing their claim on what they see on the ground and the increasing tonnage of confiscated illegal ivory. "Any legal trade in ivory stimulates a parallel illegal trade," asserts Iain Douglas-Hamilton, an elephant researcher in Kenya with Save the Elephants. Following the 1989 ban on trading ivory, poaching "stopped overnight." It quickly resumed, he and others say, when CITES agreed in 1997 to permit Botswana, Namibia, and Zimbabwe to sell 50 metric tons.

But Tom Milliken, director of Traffic, the World Conservation Union's (IUCN's) wildlife monitoring network, disputes the idea that the legal trade leads to poaching. "From 1999 to 2004, there was a downward trend in illegal ivory seizures," he says, drawing on the data from IUCN's Elephant Trade Information System. But the trend shot upward. Twenty-five thousand kilograms of ivory were seized beginning in August 2005. That's more ivory than was seized in the previous 3 years combined, triggered, researchers say, by a surge ▶

CORALS: SUFFERING FROM WHIPLASH

What a difference 48 hours makes: On 13 June, delegates to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species voted to list all species in the genus *Corallium* (pink and red corals) in Appendix II, which limits trade. But on 15 June, after the conference was scheduled to end, they voted by secret ballot to reverse that decision, leaving the jewel-like colonies to the mercy of the coral hunters who scrape the sea floor with heavy trawlers for their prey.

Red corals are one of the most valuable wildlife commodities, with a finished necklace costing \$20,000 or more. Over the past 2 decades, red coral harvests have dropped by 90% because of overcollecting, a problem

the Appendix II listing was intended to correct. "These animals are sitting ducks on the sea floor," fumes Elliott Norse, president of the Marine Conservation Biology Institute in Bellevue, Washington, one of many outraged scientists. Norse compares the trawling method of harvesting corals to "clear-cutting a forest as a way to get a couple of ginseng plants." Studies indicate that coral populations never fully recover from the trawling.

After several delegates had left for home, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco—all coral-exporting countries—moved to reopen the debate and called for the secret ballot. This time, the resolution to protect the *Corallium* failed to gain the necessary two-thirds majority. "Obviously, there's something wrong with an organization that makes a decision and then unmakes it—after the meeting is over," says Norse. —V.M.