



**Playing Politics with Animals: Corruption in CITES and the
International Wildlife Trade**

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“There is arguably no other international meeting which is so open to corruption or lobbying”
-Vidal, 2004

Politics are an important, yet often overlooked, socio-economic element that can have profound effects on animal welfare and conservation issues. Politics are the activities associated with the governance of a country, state or area (Oxford Dictionary, 2001) and although they are the formal mechanism for negotiations and agreements, there is a dark side to the political sphere that causes severe repercussions for conservation efforts. Poorly designed legislation, lack of law enforcement and political corruption are factors that exacerbate problems rather than mitigate them (Doonan et al., 2009). Corruption is the dishonest or fraudulent behavior committed by those in power for private gain (Lee, 2014) and it is prevalent in developing countries with weak institutions, political patronage and low accountability standards. Many developing countries are biodiversity hotspots with large numbers of endemic species, important habitats (Smith and Walpole, 2005) and are priority areas for conservation. Corruption has negative effects on biodiversity and the trade in wildlife, namely, which species receive protection as well as how species are being traded nationally and internationally (Smith and Walpole, 2005). There are valid scientific measures such as vulnerability modeling and gauging the ecological importance of a species which need to be taken into account when deciding which species need protection and when trade in wildlife is legally both sustainable and ethically sound. Unfortunately, political agendas are largely the deciding factors for what species receive protection and which species do not (Vidal, 2004). Corruption is deceptive and undermines many of the mechanisms that are currently in place to control it within the international wildlife trade. Corruption is illusive by its very nature, and its effects on species loss and animal welfare are difficult to quantify.

Since wildlife trade is one of the primary causes for the decimation of the world’s species (Lee, 2015), an international agreement was created with the sole purpose of ensuring that international trade of wildlife does not threaten species’ survival. This multilateral treaty is known as the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). States and countries, known as Parties, adhere voluntarily to CITES and each Party votes on the varying degrees of protection for more than 35,000 species of animals and plants; today there are 183 Parties that participate in the Convention, each with one vote for each proposal (CITES, 2017). Lobbying and corruption can come into play during the voting sessions and CITES has been criticized for corrupt practices that take place within the Convention. There are times when a species or proposal being debated has more relevance to a particular Party. When Japan was seeking to overturn the international ban on commercial whaling they

used offers of incentives and threatened withdrawal of existing aid to get support from the world's poorest nations (Van Note, 2002), nations not invested in the whaling industry. It is common for wealthy countries and lobbying groups with special interests to persuade weaker countries or countries with transitional governments to sell their votes (Vidal, 2004). Because the wildlife trade is a multibillion-dollar industry (Lee, 2015) there are vested economic interests for governments, private industries and individuals to partake in decision-making processes. When powerful entities and corrupt officials are involved in wildlife trade regulation, the outcome will often favor economic profit over species protection and animal welfare. Although there are technically only 183 CITES Parties that have official votes, it is common to find over 500 representatives from special interest groups and nearly 10,000 outside observers who attend the CITES Convention (Vidal, 2004), each with the potential to influence the process.

The plight of African elephants (*Loxodonta africana*) is a prime example of a species that is suffering due to both legal and illegal trading (Bennett, 2014). Elephants are facing an extinction crisis that has much to do with the highly lucrative trade in ivory. Ivory, which is most commonly derived from the tusks of elephants has been worth more than gold on international and domestic markets. The more valuable a trafficked or traded item, the greater the incentive for corruption. Despite the 1989 ban on all international commercial trade in African elephant ivory, the markets for ivory have nearly doubled since then (Bennett, 2014). It is no surprise that six of the eight countries identified by CITES as the worst offenders in global ivory trafficking are ranked in the top half of the most corrupt countries in the world; Uganda, the United Republic of Tanzania, Kenya, Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam (Bennett, 2014; Transparency International, 2016). Pro-traders fighting to keep ivory in circulation argue that legalization of an ivory trade would allow for more effective regulation and control of the trade and funds generated could be used to support conservation of the species (Bennett, 2014). Despite mounting evidence that disapprove these claims (Lusseau & Lee, 2016), China has delivered these very arguments to the CITES Standing Committee; and it is not coincidental that China boasts the world's largest ivory market (Bale, 2017). Because of such pressure, CITES is now considering the development of a legal ivory trade (Lee et al., 2012; Martin et al., 2016). Research into the effects of corruption on biodiversity is scarce and underdeveloped (Smith and Walpole, 2005) making it difficult to quantify the influence corruption has had on the ivory trade, and on the survival of African elephants.

Corruption occurs at every stage of wildlife trade supply chains undermining the controls within the legal trade and making it nearly impossible to distinguish between legal and illegal activity. For instance, officials have been found altering CITES permits so that an illegal item can pass as legal

(UNODC, 2012). Traders have been found to bribe game wardens, enforcement officers, customs officers, government officials and even judges (Martini, 2013; Walker, 2009). Diplomats have been caught trafficking wildlife parts using their diplomatic pouches which receive international diplomatic immunity from search or seizure and high-level government officials and judges have been found to be high-ranking participants in smuggling rings (Martini, 2013; Lee, 2014). Because the wildlife trade has a high profit yield with lesser penalties than other illicit trades, it is highly susceptible to political manipulation, coercion and corruption.

The CITES treaty is the largest international agreement working to combat illegal activity, however it contains no enforcement requirements. The treaty relies upon individual nations to administer provisions through legislation within their own legal system. This system of self-regulation can become problematic when signatory nations themselves are involved in violations of the treaty. The International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime (ICWC) could be used to counter this issue. The current objective of ICWC is to strengthen and support national criminal justice systems (UNODC, 2010, online), but its role could be augmented to also oversee an international auditing system. Standardizing legislation and administering international enforcement across CITES member states could deter corrupt government officials from abusing their power.

Whistleblower schemes have been shown to be effective deterrents in corruption (Binetti, 2016), but, again, laws need to be strengthened to protect the people that are willing to step forward. Many governments do not offer programs insuring that whistleblowers receive protection or confidentiality under the law. Several non-governmental organizations have taken the lead in developing promising anti-corruption model strategies to create more transparency (Lee, 2014). There have been anti-corruption reform projects utilizing technology to provide secure platforms and anonymous reporting mechanisms where citizens can securely and anonymously take part in reducing corruption through non-governmental bodies. Corruption is widespread, insidious, complex and difficult to fight. Finding innovative ways to mitigate these challenges is essential for conservationists working to eradicate the illegal wildlife trade; acknowledging the importance of politics and addressing corruption must be part of the comprehensive response that is necessary to achieve a positive impact.

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