

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)

Can you imagine living in a world without plants such as orchids, mahogany trees, and cacti? Or a world without populations of great whales, sea turtles, and parrots? The vast diversity of the world's plant and animal life is disappearing at a faster rate than new species are being discovered and recorded. Scientists estimate that within the next 30 years more than one-fifth of the millions of types of plants, animals, and other organisms living here on Earth will become extinct.

Faced with these frightening facts, representatives from around the world have united in ratifying the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) to protect the world's wild plant and animal species by regulating their use in commercial trade. CITES representatives are working to ensure that tomorrow's generation will have a chance to see the rich and plentiful wild fauna and flora we see today.

What is CITES?

CITES is a comprehensive conservation treaty signed by more than 150 countries, including the United States. This international agreement regulates the commercial trade of endangered species and monitors the trade of species that are at risk of becoming endangered. Since the treaty's ratification in 1974, CITES representatives have worked tirelessly to protect the world's wildlife.

Many species of both plants and animals have become threatened or endangered because of unregulated trade. CITES representatives work to preserve thousands of plants, mammals, amphibians, and fish that have been traded commercially without oversight in the past. Some of the plants and animals that are endangered or threatened include mahogany trees, insectivorous plants, Madonna lilies, and saguaro cacti as well as sea turtles, bald eagles, and African gorillas.

How CITES Protects Wildlife

In an attempt to prevent species from disappearing, CITES representatives established a system of controls over the international trade of threatened plants and wildlife. Products like clothing, medicine, and souvenirs made from wild flora and fauna are also regulated or restricted. Under this system, governments issue permits authorizing plants and wildlife to be traded from one country to another.

The CITES treaty classifies plants and wildlife into three categories or appendices based on different protection levels.

Appendix I species are the most stringently regulated because their status is creeping close to extinction. This appendix includes all species threatened with extinction, such as some cacti, orchids, African gorillas, and parrots, which may or may not be affected by trade. Permits for the export of these species cannot be issued except under special circumstances, and none of these species can be used for commercial purposes.

However, there are a few exceptions. Appendix I artificially propagated plants, like Appendix II plants, must be accompanied by a certificate of artificial propagation or an export permit, but an import permit is not required. These plants can be traded for commercial purposes. Both orchid seedlings and tissue cultures, if grown on sterile media in sterile containers, are exempt from CITES permit requirements. Many other Appendix II plants, excluding cacti, are also exempt.

Appendix II species, such as American ginseng, many orchids, and birdwing butterflies, are protected and classified as threatened. Although these species are not currently near extinction, they may become extinct unless their trade is strictly regulated. CITES requires that exporting countries supply traders with the proper permits before Appendix II species can leave one country and enter another.

Finally, Appendix III contains species, such as big-leaf mahogany and Asiatic buffalo, that countries deem necessary to regulate to prevent the species' exploitation. Countries ask for the cooperation and assistance of other countries in protecting Appendix III species. For these species, a CITES permit is required from the country that requests the species be added to the list. A CITES certificate of origin is needed for Appendix III species from all other countries.

International Enforcement

CITES representatives convene at least once every 2 or 3 years to evaluate the state of the world's wild fauna and flora. During these conventions, national representatives vote on whether to transfer species from one appendix to another and whether to add or remove a species from the list.

Participating countries enforce the treaty's provisions and impose penalties upon individuals caught smuggling plants and wildlife listed in the appendices. Both importing and exporting countries are held accountable for adhering to CITES provisions and regulations in the trading of plants and animals. Countries must ensure that species are not illegally exported or imported from one country to another. Persons caught smuggling plants or wildlife from one country to another face criminal prosecution.

U.S. Enforcement

As the U.S. management authority, the Department of the Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) is responsible for overseeing all aspects of CITES within the United States. In particular, FWS enforces all CITES regulations with regard to endangered animals or products from these animals being transported into or outside of the United States. FWS ensures that importers and exporters have the proper permits for transporting and trading these animals or products.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) enforces the provisions of CITES related to plants and works closely with FWS. Officials from APHIS' Plant Protection and Quarantine (PPQ) program inspect all plant shipments imported into the United States through the 15 plant inspection stations located nationwide. Depending upon inspection results, APHIS employees may refuse entry, seize, or release plants that are imported or exported. APHIS is responsible for enforcing plant quarantine laws and the CITES permit requirements during these plant inspections.

APHIS' Role

In 1999, of the more than 694 million plants inspected for quarantine purposes at the 15 plant inspection stations, nearly 19 million were regulated because of their status as endangered species. APHIS also facilitated the export of 3 million CITES plants, and over 40 million kilograms of CITES-regulated products such as ginseng. If plants protected by CITES arrive at an APHIS plant inspection station without the appropriate documents or the plants do not match the documentation accompanying them, the plants are seized immediately. APHIS then obtains legal ownership through forfeiture procedures.

APHIS notifies FWS of all seized plants protected by CITES. FWS distributes these plants to designated "rescue centers" throughout the United States. One such rescue center is the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, where many endangered orchids are displayed for the public's enjoyment and education. CITES officials of the countries from which the seized plants originated are notified of the plants' placement in the rescue center, and the exporting country may arrange to bring the plants back at its own expense.

FWS also consults with APHIS to ensure that exotic animal species entering the country under CITES meet animal quarantine requirements so that these animals will not introduce pests and diseases that could endanger animal health or the livestock industries of the United States. When U.S. zoological facilities apply to FWS for CITES permits to import protected animals, FWS verifies with APHIS that these facilities are in compliance with the Animal Welfare Act. APHIS also manages two quarantine facilities for smuggled birds. After the birds undergo quarantine, APHIS works with FWS to place these smuggled, endangered, and threatened birds in aviaries or zoological parks.

Securing Necessary Permits

Importing CITES-protected plants into the United States requires several documents from various government agencies. All permit arrangements should be made as far in advance as possible. APHIS inspectors cannot make last-minute arrangements to allow endangered plants into or out of the United States without the proper documentation from FWS and the CITES-management authorities of other countries.

Permits that may be required include the following:

- Export permits from the wildlife permit office of the country of origin.
- Import permits for Appendix I material from the FWS Federal Wildlife Permit Office.
- Import permits from APHIS. All plants imported for growing or propagation must meet plant health permit and quarantine requirements.
- A general permit from APHIS for commercial shipments of CITES-regulated plants.

If there is ever any doubt about whether CITES requirements apply, APHIS recommends that individuals and businesses ask questions in advance rather than risk facing confiscation and possible legal penalties. To verify plant permit requirements and to secure the proper forms, labels, and instructions, contact:

Permit Unit
Plant Protection and Quarantine
USDA-APHIS
4700 River Road, Unit 136
Riverdale, MD 20737-1236
(301) 734-8645 or (877) 770-5990
Telefax: 301-734-5786
Web site: <http://www.aphis.usda.gov/ppq/permits/cites>

Or

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Division of Management Authority
4401 North Fairfax Drive, Room 700
Arlington, VA 22203
(1-800) 358-2104 or (703) 358-2104
Telefax: (703) 358-2281
Email: r9ia_oma@fws.gov

APHIS charges fees for some permits and certificates, as well as inspection and quarantine services.

Buyers Beware

Despite international efforts to enforce CITES, some plant species are in danger of becoming extinct because of illegal trade through laundering, poaching, smuggling, and improper documentation. For example, smugglers have attempted to falsify propagation papers for Appendix I plants that actually were collected from the wild or to hide endangered plants in baggage.

The United States is the world's largest consumer of wildlife and their products, followed by Japan and Western Europe. Consumers can assist international efforts to protect wildlife by becoming better informed. Reducing demand for wild-collected endangered plants is a critical part of efforts to sustain wild flora populations. However, many plants listed in Appendix I are artificially propagated and are available for purchase from reputable nurseries and other botanical sources.

The following tips can help preserve wild plants:

- While traveling, refrain from picking, digging up, or buying plants or plant products that may be endangered without checking first with the proper authorities.

- Always buy plants from reputable sources. Remember that most cycads, all orchids, and all cacti are endangered species.

For more information on CITES, please visit the APHIS CITES web site at <http://www.aphis.usda.gov/ppq/permits/cites> and the FWS web site at <http://international.fws.gov>.

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