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UN-backed meeting seeks to clamp down on poaching of elephants, rhinos



Adult elephant roaming peacefully in the Mikumi National Park in Tanzania. (1980)

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Faced with increased poaching and illegal trade in ivory and horns of elephants and rhinoceroses, 300 government and civil society experts worldwide are seeking to strengthen conservation with new financial mechanisms at a United Nations-backed meeting in Geneva this week.

“Innovative financial solutions are required to achieve the huge conservation task before us,” John Scanlon, Secretary-General of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora ([CITES](#)), told the Standing Committee of the 175-member State treaty, whose secretariat is administered by the UN Environmental Programme ([UNEP](#)).

“With nearly seven billion people consuming biodiversity every day in the form of medicines, food, clothes, furniture, perfumes or luxury goods, a robust CITES is more relevant and needed today than ever. Enhanced cooperation with other organizations and initiatives is crucial to bridge the financial gap between the cost to implement CITES regulations effectively, the resources currently allocated and the services provided to stakeholders,” he added.

High on the agenda of the five-day meeting, which began yesterday, are new financial mechanisms, elephant conservation, measures to reduce current levels of poaching of rhinos, tigers and other big cats, illegal trade in mahogany and other timber species, the fate of sturgeon and the caviar trade, and the sourcing of reptile skins used in the leather industry.

[According](#) to a report prepared by the CITES programme for Monitoring the Illegal Killing of Elephants (MIKE), last year saw the highest levels of elephant poaching since 2002, with Central Africa being of most concern, with poverty, poor governance and consumption patterns in China, among the prime causes.

The committee will consider targeted measures for tightening ivory trade controls all along the illegal trade chain in key African and Asian countries, and for raising awareness in Asian markets and transit countries.

With rhinos, numbers have increased consistently since the early 1990s, particularly in Africa, thanks to CITES trade controls, but this trend is being jeopardized by the upsurge in demand and consequent increase in poaching levels, with illegal trade in horns, used in Asia as a medicine and for dagger handles, the driving force behind this poaching.

According to a South African Government report, 174 rhinos were illegally killed there in the first six months of this year, with poaching levels rising dramatically in recent years from 13 in 2007 to 330 in 2010. More than 120 suspected poachers have been arrested since January. Rhinos elsewhere, particularly in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), India, Mozambique, Nepal, and Zimbabwe, are also suffering.

The illegal trade includes fraudulent applications for CITES documents, abuse of legal trophy hunting and the use of couriers smuggling horns from Southern Africa to Asia’s Far East. The committee is also reviewing the legal origin of mahogany from Latin America. New timber information systems will be considered to ensure that the harvest is sustainable and the trade legal and traceable.

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