Crocodiles and CITES (Folie 1)

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1. Introduction

For some people, a crocodile leather handbag stands for the killing of animals and the eradication of species for the purpose of producing luxury goods which, in their view, are absolutely unnecessary. For others, the same handbag symbolises the sustainable use of a renewable resource which is compatible, and even may enhance, the survival of wild species, and they will claim that the management of crocodiles is one of the few, if not the only success story of CITES. The first group of people comprises mainly animal rightists and animal welfare people with fundamentalistic views and emotional arguments. The second group consists of pragmatic conservationists, among them the members of IUCN's Crocodile Specialist Group.

2. Over-exploitation and trade bans (1973-1981)

Before CITES was concluded in 1973, crocodiles were renowned as ugly animals feeding on humans and livestock. In many countries, hunting of crocodiles was **not regulated**, and often they were killed as **vermin**. No money-collecting NGO would have used the argument that the crocodiles were **overexploited for the skin trade** and thus have become threatened, or even endangered and locally extinct.

However, at the Plenipotentiary Conference which met at Washington D.C. to negotiate CITES, the crocodiles must have had some good lobbyists, because the majority of species was included in **CITES Appendix** I with the aim of suspending commercial trade, and all remaining species were listed in Appendix II, obliging Party States to regulate the off-take in a sustainable way which would ensure the survival of the populations.

3. Breeding in captivity versus ranching (1983)

The term "**Bred in captivity**" is defined as referring only to offspring, including eggs, born or otherwise produced in a controlled environment of parents that mated in a controlled environment.

As mentioned earlier, commercial trade in crocodile skins and other products came to a halt for all species listed in Appendix I, when CITES became effective in 1975. The trade ban did, however, not apply to specimens commercially bred in captivity, because article VII.4 of the Convention rules that "specimens of a species included in Appendix I bred in captivity for commercial purposes shall be deemed to be specimens of species included in Appendix II." By the way of resolutions, the Party States accepted, in addition, the principles that the

founder animals should have been legally obtained, and that the captive stock should be managed so that it will not depend of the introduction of additional wild specimens.

The first crocodile farms came into existence in 1945 in Singapore, in 1950 in Bangkok and in 1959 in Djakarta. The 1960ies saw the establishment of more new farms in South-East Asia, in Africa and in the United States. Until today, the number of real captive breeding operations producing crocodylians in significant numbers remains fairly limited. The conservation value of these farms is often contested, because they do almost nothing in favour of the wild populations, because they sometimes employ hybridisation practices which are incompatible with conservation, and because they often breed exotic species posing a potential threat to the native crocodylians, e.g. Nile crocodiles in the range of the broad-snouted caiman, or American alligators in Australia or China.

Commercial Appendix I captive breeding operations must be **registered**. The criteria for registering the first operation for a given species are defined by a resolution adopted in 1989. They are very difficult to fulfil, and the procedure is so complicated that it rather discourages people from trying to commercially breed new species.

Another concept is **"Ranching"**. Ranching is defined as the rearing in a controlled environment of specimens taken from the wild. Ranching operations collect young animals or eggs, bring them in a controlled environment where the survival rate is higher than in the wild, and rear them until they have a commerciable size. Consequently, crocodile ranches can be described as rearing establishments.

Because the exemptions under Article VII of the Convention do not allow for commercial trade in reared Appendix I specimens, ranching operations can only work if the population concerned is **transferred from Appendix I to Appendix II**. By adopting Resolution 3.15 at its 1981 meeting in New Delhi, the Conference of the Parties established a policy for such transfers. According to the resolution, a transfer should only take place if the wild population is subject to a successful conservation programme, if it is no longer endangered (which per se would already be a good reason for downlisting), and if it benefits from the ranching operation through reintroduction of reared specimens or other ways. The specimens used for the operation must be taken from nature in a manner which has no significant detrimental effects on the wild population. The Ranching operation should be likely to be successful and should be carried out in a non-cruel manner. Finally, the products must be clearly marked and/or documented, and the Management Authority must submit regular reports to the CITES Secretariat.

In 1992, at their 8th meeting in Kyoto the Party States assessed the question "Breeding versus ranching". They came to the conclusion that ranching operations are, in principle, more beneficial to the wild populations than captive breeding operations, and decided to make commercial captive breeding more difficult by laying down, in resolution 8.22, additional conditions that must be fulfilled by crocodile breeding centres.

4. The setting of export quotas (1985-1997)

Already at the 4th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties, held in 1983, Zimbabwe succeeded to transfer its Nile crocodile population to Appendix II under a ranching scheme. All other proposals to transfer national crocodile populations to Appendix II or to delete them completely from the appendices failed. But they had another consequence in that a working meeting was organised in Brussels to discuss crocodile related problems. While the working group recognised the legitimacy of projects to sustainably use certain crocodile populations, It was obvious, that in many cases the so-called “Berne criteria” for a downlisting could not be fulfilled, because all crocodylians had been listed before these criteria had been established, and that even in the case of ranching proposals the biological background information required was not available. Consequently, a quota system was proposed as a novel approach for transfers of Appendix I species that had been listed in 1979 or earlier. This proposal was adopted by the Conference of the Parties at its 5th meeting in Buenos Aires.

Switzerland, the Depositary Government, had to play a special role in the new approach: The implementation of the quota system was subjected to periodic review. In case of reports not being presented by the range states or other problems arising, Switzerland would submit a proposal to retransfer the population concerned to Appendix I. The combination of quota regulations and ranching led to a dynamic approach which is unique in the CITES system, and which I would like to demonstrate by using the Nile crocodile as an example: In 1973, the Plenipotentiary Conference included the entire species in appendix I. As mentioned earlier, Zimbabwe was the first country to succeeded in transferring its national population to Appendix II under a ranching scheme. At the 5th meeting of the Conference of the Parties, 9 other national populations were downlisted under quota schemes. One meeting later, Botswana followed, and presented at the 7th meeting a ranching proposal which was adopted together with the ranching proposals made by Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia. Ethiopia and Somalia presented a quota proposal which were also adopted. At the 8th meeting, Kenya, Tanzania and Ethiopia were ready for ranching, while Cameroon, Congo and Sudan had demonstrated their inability to manage their quota system in satisfactory way, and saw their populations retransferred to Appendix I. At the 9th meeting, the ranching era began for South Africa, and Somalia had to admit that they had failed with their quota scheme. With the transition of the Madagascar and Uganda population into ranching at the 10th meeting, we have today the situation that all quota schemes have run out, and that no less than 11 countries are trading in Nile crocodile products which are harvested in a sustainable way. The next step would be to waive the still existing ties and to proceed to an unconditional Appendix II-listing with the harvesting mechanisms being under the full responsibility of the range states. This has already been achieved by Australia in the case of the saltwater crocodile.

5. Changing trade patterns and recovery of wild crocodile populations.

The result of the mechanisms established by the CITES Conference was a marked change in

the trade pattern. Legal marked skins from State controlled culling, from ranching operations and from breeding farms continuously replaced the illegally traded skins. Today, successful operations for the sustainable use of crocodylians exist in more than 20 countries, including, in addition to the African countries already mentioned, Argentina, Colombia, Cuba, Guyana, Nicaragua, Venezuela, the United States of America, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and Australia.

Crocodiles are no longer considered useless vermin, but animals with a high commercial value and a considerable economic potential for disadvantaged regions in developing countries. The sustainable use schemes for crocodiles created incentives to protect crocodile habitats, because the industry has recognised that they rely on a regular and important supply from ranching operations or from culling operations in the wild which cannot be guaranteed without large, contiguous and intact habitats.

An OECD Report from the year 1997 states that the illegal trade in crocodile skins has ceased world wide, that the legal trade comprised some 1.3 million skins, that this trade is steadily increasing and may reach 2 million skins in the year 2000, and that 70 % of the crocodylian species are no longer threatened with extinction.

6. Recommendations and conclusions

As a result of the experience made with crocodylians, the following recommendations can be made:

- Conservation efforts based on the sustainable use principle should be encouraged.
- *Ex situ* captive breeding should only be encouraged when the conservation benefits for the species concerned are proven.
- The ranching concept should be extended to include other species such as green iguana, royal python, chameleons, parrots or butterflies.
- There should be less reluctance to proceed to a split-listing of species under CITES (meaning that certain populations are transferred to Appendix II while others remain under the strict protection of Appendix I).
- The commercial use of wild animal populations and the legal trade in specimens of CITES regulated species should not be stigmatised as not being compatible with nature conservation.

Many people still believe that all trade in wildlife is fundamentally evil and incompatible with the survival of the species concerned. The fact that a species is listed by CITES makes people believe that this species is necessarily threatened with extinction, although most Appendix II species have been included for monitoring purposes only.

This is why people in industrialised countries often refrain from purchasing products made

from CITES listed species, such as our handbag, and even offend other people who wear furs, snake skin shoes, and caiman leather watchbands. Sometimes one sees posters and exhibits in zoos who reaffirm this attitude.

I hope, however, that I could convince you that this attitude is wrong, and that you agree with me when I conclude by stating that the sustainable use of wild animal and plant populations and the regulated trade in products thereof can be an important element in ensuring the survival of wild fauna and flora and of their habitats, in particular if the benefits are re-directed to local landholders and communities.

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