



Response: Commentary: Think Before You Act: Improving the Conservation Outcomes of CITES Listing Decisions

Rosie Cooney^{1*}, Daniel W. S. Challender², Steven Broad³, Dilys Roe^{4,5} and Daniel J. D. Natusch⁶

¹ Fenner School of Environment and Society, Australian National University, Canberra, ACT, Australia, ² Department of Zoology, University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom, ³ Independent Consultant–Trade, Nature, Strategy, Cambridge, United Kingdom, ⁴ International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), London, United Kingdom, ⁵ Species Survival Commission/Commission on Environment, Economic and Social Policy Sustainable Use and Livelihoods Specialist Group, International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Gland, Switzerland, ⁶ School of Natural Sciences, Macquarie University, Sydney, NSW, Australia

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A Commentary on

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In our recent article (Cooney et al., 2021) we highlight that international wildlife trade has changed beyond recognition in recent decades and specifically since the drafting of the CITES treaty in 1972. We critique the process used by member governments to prescribe trade measures through listing of wildlife species in the CITES Appendices, which does not require, encourage, or even formally allow for consideration of likely real-world conservation impacts of those decisions. We explain how, in consequence, the treaty is ineffective in many cases, and propose reforms to CITES we consider will lead to greater conservation benefits for listed species. These include the development of a formal mechanism for Parties to consider the likelihood of positive conservation impacts of listing decisions, taking into account the best available information from a wide range of sources, and amplifying the input of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs) in the listing process. Orenstein et al. (2022) seek to refute our arguments, arguing Parties should resolutely avoid such foresight – restricting themselves to considering only the biological and trade status of species, and contending that CITES already adequately supports the inclusion of IPLC voices. We welcome their response, as it typifies the blinkered perspective that some special interest groups have repeatedly – and successfully – promoted within CITES.

A key feature of Orenstein et al.'s response is their misrepresentation of our call for more thoughtful assessment of the potential impact of listing decisions, in order to maximize the likelihood of positive conservation outcomes. We call for decision-making to look beyond the current CITES listing criteria and consider insights from economic analyses and social science, plus broader questions such as law enforcement capabilities and costs, and likely harvest/trade dynamics. Orenstein et al. apparently misunderstand this call. They claim that “including socio-economic factors in listing decisions” would “disrupt the scientific basis of the listing process” and could fundamentally undermine CITES’ ability to protect species from over-exploitation

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David Jack Coates,
Department of Biodiversity,
Conservation and Attractions
(DBCA), Australia

Reviewed by:

Alexandra Callen,
The University of Newcastle, Australia

*Correspondence:

Rosie Cooney
rosie.cooney@anu.edu.au

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for international trade. However, they mischaracterise our argument, implying that scientific information should be “weighed against economic factors” or that we believe that decisions with negative socio-economic impacts should be avoided. But our argument is not that negative socio-economic impacts should be made visible and avoided, but that socio-economic information should be used to inform decision-making, in order to ensure effective outcomes for conservation.

This misrepresentation typifies debates on proposals to amend the CITES Appendices at Conference of the Parties (CoP) meetings, and is often employed to ensure that listing decisions remain firmly focused on narrow biological/trade criteria only. This is unfortunate, as it is now well recognized from a scientific standpoint that achieving sustainability of wildlife harvest and trade (domestic and/or international) depends on the interaction of various biological, social, economic, and governance factors (Hutton and Leader-Williams, 2003; Milner-Gulland, 2012; Cooney et al., 2015; Biggs et al., 2021). While Orenstein et al. claim our recommendations would undermine “science-based decision making”, our proposal is in fact for a CITES process that reflects contemporary science of wildlife use and trade, not the science of the 1970’s. Our proposals reflect the need for understanding of the social-ecological systems (SEs) (Ostrom, 2009) in which the harvest, use, and trade of wildlife takes place; that is, systems that involve interaction of factors such as market characteristics, the nature of consumer demand, the incentives facing key actors, and associated formal and informal institutions (Foster et al., 2019; t Sas-Rolfes et al., 2022).

Orenstein et al.’s argument is that all such information should be ignored in making decisions on trade interventions – an argument we find both absurd and irresponsible. To ignore such evidence in decision making is to overlook critical insights that could benefit species conservation and/or risks that could undermine conservation. One concern of Orenstein et al. relates to the listing of commercially important species in CITES. They argue that considering a broader array of information when deciding on listings might make it more difficult to include commercially important species in CITES (these include fish and timber species). However, information such as that on the drivers and dynamics of trade can rather enable decision-makers to grapple more effectively with the potent barriers – including the responses of powerful economic players – that sometimes hinder CITES’ effectiveness on the ground (see e.g., Foster et al., 2019).

We call for meaningful and formalized inclusion of IPLCs in CITES processes, while Orenstein et al. argue this is unnecessary. They defend the current level of inclusion of IPLCs in CITES

decision-making as adequate, citing the references to IPLCs in various CITES resolutions and the ability of IPLCs to register as observers at CITES meetings. However, CITES markedly lags behind other key biodiversity-related (and other environmental) international fora in this respect. CoP3 of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), for example, established an International Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity (IIFB) which serves as a caucus of representatives of IPLCs and provides a forum where they can discuss upcoming decisions, decide on common positions, and make interventions in plenary and working groups. Within the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), CoP 21 established the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform (LCIPP) to facilitate engagement of IPLCs with the Convention. CoP24 established a Facilitative Working Group, supported by the UNFCCC secretariat, the membership of which is 50% Parties and 50% IPLCs. We appreciate (and support) Orenstein et al.’s desire to see greater equity between actors in wildlife trade supply chains. Ironically, this could best be achieved through our call for inclusion of economic and social information, and greater input from IPLCs, in CITES decision making processes.

In conclusion, contemporary conservation science increasingly emphasizes interdisciplinary approaches to wildlife conservation based on the recognition that reliance on biological criteria is typically insufficient for designing appropriate conservation interventions. Yet this recognition is yet to surface in CITES decision-making processes. Decisions to list species in the CITES Appendices are too easily celebrated as progress (Challender and MacMillan, 2019), despite evidence that sometimes they do not lead to positive on-the-ground conservation outcomes. Our argument is simply that the full range of factors that shape successful conservation impact ought to be taken into account. It is time for CITES processes to catch up with contemporary thinking that views the future of people and nature as inextricably connected.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors wrote sections of this response and contributed ideas and thinking. All authors approved the submitted version.

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