

CITES and Biodiversity Conservation

Caroline Ferguson

International efforts to protect biodiversity are intrinsically entangled with the socio-political and economic environment. Though well intentioned, these measures are sometimes compromised by both developing and developed nations, whose coffers are filled by the trade of endangered species. Here, I will assess the Convention on the International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES): its strengths and its weaknesses, with a case study of the Atlantic Bluefin tuna. CITES aims to protect wild flora and fauna whose conservation status is threatened by international trade. It does so by listing species in one of three Appendices, Appendix I being providing the most robust protections and Appendix III the least. The preamble recognizes the intrinsic value of biodiversity and the importance of preserving it for future generations. CITES was key in protecting elephants from the ivory trade and has made efforts to defend tigers and rhinos from similar wasteful poaching practices. However, what CITES best demonstrates is this: biodiversity conservation requires a true ecosystem approach, one that accounts not just for habitats and species interactions, but also for the economic and political ecosystem in which a species resides. Numerous cases have demonstrated that the protections granted – or denied – to highly valuable commercial species defy science. This is especially true of highly migratory marine organisms.

Migratory species are the most in need of international protections because their life histories do not respect political boundaries. An Atlantic Bluefin tuna, for example, begins its life in the Gulf of Mexico. It will migrate north to Newfoundland, where cool waters and strong currents create huge concentrations of food. Then it will begin the long journey to the Mediterranean. It may make this journey across the Atlantic several

times in its life, every time leaving clearly defined Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) where it might otherwise enjoy regional protections. On the High Seas, where there are virtually no regulations regarding its capture, it is easily caught in schools by commercial fisherman, to be sold in Japan for up to \$100,000 USD (yes, *per fish*). It is clear that commercial interests are in conflict with new protections for this charismatic fish. Unfortunately, CITES leaves plenty of room for foul play.

In 2010 and 2013, Monaco introduced a trade ban on Atlantic Bluefin tuna (Appendix I), with the support of the US and France (the Mediterranean's largest consumer of the fish), as well as the scientific community. Japan made it clear that it would vote down any proposal to protect the species, going so far as to serve this delicacy at its pre-Convention party in 2013. In the end, economics forces trumped scientific recommendations and the tuna was not listed under any Appendix.

But even had Japan not convinced other fishing nations to vote against the ban, the country would have had ample excuse to continue the capture and trade of the fish. CITES allows countries to make reservations, under which the species becomes completely unregulated within the country. They could also have claimed the catch was for scientific purposes, as they have with whales at the International Whaling Commission (IWC). Finally, they could have accepted the listing but determined their own export quota, based on a country-selected "scientific authority".

Ultimately, CITES fails to protect the most vulnerable species because it allows countries to refuse listings on economic grounds. If CITES and other international treaties on biodiversity conservation are to be successful, they must eliminate this conflict of interest and replace the method for listing species with a more science-driven approach.