

RHINOS!

AT THE UNITED NATIONS

Dangerous, aggressive, short-sighted... but we are not the only species that needs the UN. Aside from resolving disputes involving Homo sapiens, the UN plays a major role in the conservation of endangered species. This article examines how it works, with particular reference to rhinos, through a conversation with a rhino supporter.

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Is it like the UN we see on the news?

When the 175 countries involved get together (a "Conference of the Parties") it would bear some resemblance to the UN on TV; discussing sanctions against belligerent nations. Decisions are taken by consensus, or on the basis of a majority vote. The countries are those that have signed up to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, ("CITES"), which deals with endangered species ranging from rhinos and dogfish to timber and orchids.

Trade in endangered species! So they work together to stop this evil trade?

Except that trade in endangered species is not necessarily considered evil - so long as it is sustainable. The idea of allowing some trade in endangered species, to give governments and local people an economic interest in maintaining healthy populations of the species, is considered the best way to ensure their survival. The principle of the sustainable use of natural resources is mainstream amongst biologists and professional conservationists.

How do you know if the trade is sustainable?

Decisions to restrict or allow trade, and in some cases specific quotas for trade, are made on the basis of scientific evidence. There must be a finding that there is no detriment to the species from the trade. Decisions are revised in the light of new evidence.

Trade in rhinos?

You may have heard about trophy hunting of white rhinos in South Africa, and black rhinos in South Africa and Namibia. Trophy hunting is a form of sustainable use that is permitted subject to the usual test of no detriment to the species; other examples include lions, leopards and elephants.

But there are only 4,000 black rhinos left!

There is a specific quota of five rhinos for each country, so the number allowed to be taken each year is very small. Old male rhinos can disrupt breeding programmes, and would have to be removed in any case. There is a careful selection process, and the funds raised must be reinvested in rhino conservation.

Is there an approved trade in rhino horn?

No. Some countries do have stockpiles of horn from rhinos which have died naturally, but there have been no sales of these, similar to the elephant ivory stockpile sales to China and Japan which were approved last year. Before the UN parties approved these sales,

there was a big debate about whether it might stimulate poaching, and this would no doubt come up for debate in relation to rhinos too. After reports of illegal traders booking hunts posing as legitimate hunters, South Africa now limits hunts to one per year per person, individually licensed and attended by an official.

What comes next?

The next Conference of the Parties is scheduled for Spring 2010 in Doha, Qatar. So now is a busy time for the governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that attend the conference, as the various governments decide whether they want to put forward proposals for increased or decreased protection for particular species months ahead of the date of the conference, and a large volume of paper supporting their positions is published.

Can I come and watch?

No, the general public are not admitted. Only sovereign states can vote. NGOs that are considered "competent in conservation" can request admission, and may address the conference at the discretion of the chair. They can also participate in working groups that are formed to consider an issue and make recommendations to the main conference. However, there is usually extensive media coverage, and you can find out more and follow the proceedings at www.cites.org

Grant

Safari Club International Foundation funds and manages worldwide programmes dedicated to wildlife conservation, outdoor education and humanitarian services. Most recently, it awarded \$1,979 to Save the Rhino for equipment for Hluhluwe Game Reserve in South Africa. Our grateful thanks as always.