

REPORT BACK

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Every four years the IUCN convenes its World Conservation Congress (WCC), the world's biggest international conservation convention. The 2012 event, hosted in September by South Korea on the resort island of Jeju, was the largest to date, attracting some 10 000 participants. **Michael 't Sas-Rolfes** was there - and presents this behind-the-scenes view of the all-important sessions on poaching and illegal trade.

The Congress consists of two parts: the Forum, which is a platform for public discussion on a range of contemporary conservation issues, and the Member's Assembly, which is the IUCN's decision-making body, a kind of conservation parliament, representing both government agencies and NGOs. The five-day Forum explored five themes (one for each day) under the banner 'Nature plus': climate, food, development, people and governance, and 'life'. Events ranged in size and interaction from plenary panel presentations through workshops of various sizes to more intimate poster sessions. The IUCN's different divisions also hosted their own pavilions focusing on their specific interests: species, protected areas, business and biodiversity, environmental justice and marine issues.

On arrival I was presented with a formidable programme listing all the events and locations within the massive convention centre complex and faced the daunting task of trying to figure out where to go and when. After a post-jet-lag day of acclimatising and getting oriented, I decided to focus on sessions dealing with my main areas of interest: poaching and illegal trade.

A sobering session on elephant and rhino poaching highlighted how this problem continues to grow, Africa-wide, driven by a combination of rising affluence in Asian consumer countries and increasing trade links between the two continents. Asians were conspicuously absent from the audience.

A subsequent smaller workshop convened to discuss the issue of enhanced governance of trade between Africa and China. Predictably, much of the discussion revolved around the current rhino poaching crisis. Numerous southern Africans and members of the global TRAFFIC/WWF network were there, but China was represented by a single government official who was unable to

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shed much light on the subject. Rhino trade remains a serious offence in China and little is known about the extent to which it takes place in that country - the main market for rhino horn is still perceived to be Vietnam.

A WWF representative who had done work on the Vietnamese market expressed the opinion that it may take a long time - possibly several generations - for Vietnamese attitudes toward the consumption of rare wildlife products to change. He explained that consuming products such as rhino horn is a status symbol for top politicians and successful yuppies.

A representative from WWF-International announced a massive campaign to raise the political profile of the poaching crisis to mobilise more political will and resources. WWF and TRAFFIC seem confident that rhino poaching can be addressed through improved enforcement and are also investigating so-called 'demand reduction' measures. But South African delegates warned that financial resources for rhino protection are severely stretched and that the current expenditure on enforcement cannot be sustained indefinitely without seeing any tangible results.

Although I did not participate in the IUCN Member's Assembly, I observed the evolution of an interesting motion on bear farming. The original motion, aimed at phasing out the farming of bears for medical purposes, was strongly opposed by Chinese officials, who insisted that bear bile is an important ingredient in traditional Chinese medicine and that farming is necessary to shield wild bear populations from overexploitation. A compromise motion was crafted, focused on monitoring and mitigating the impact of bear farming on wild populations.

On the final day of the WCC, the Members voted for their new President of the Union: Mr Zhang Xinsheng from China. It will be interesting to see what evolves in the next four years of IUCN conservation efforts.

Michael 't Sas-Rolfes is an independent conservation economist with a particular interest in international wildlife trade policy.



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