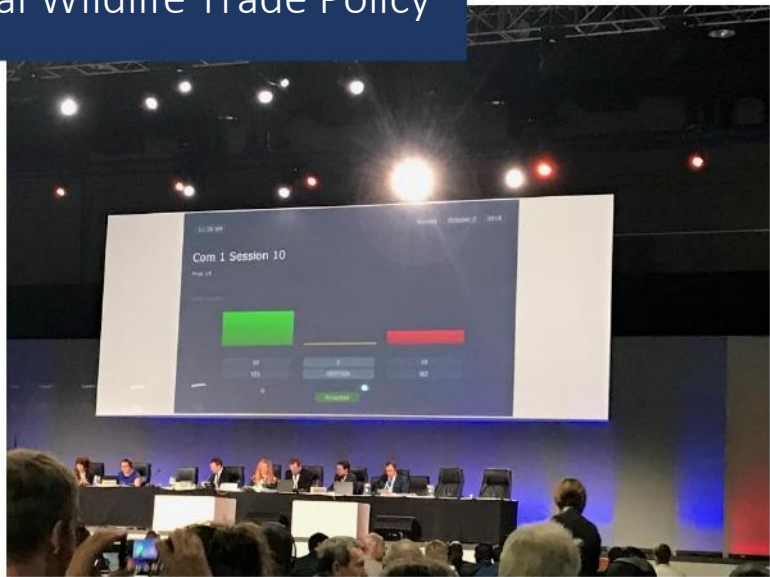




# Towards Effective Global Wildlife Trade Policy



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## *In Brief*

Key international policy decisions concerning wildlife trade are characterised by high levels of uncertainty and speculation. The result is poorly designed policies and conservation interventions that are badly planned and weakly evaluated, if at all. This is epitomised in CITES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, the primary instrument for ensuring sustainability in international wildlife trade. In CITES, governments and observer organisations deliberate on decisions with radical implications for species in trade (e.g., whether to establish trade bans and other trade controls), but which are characterised by inherent uncertainty. This research will provide novel insights to inform changes to global policymaking processes by (1) linking theory to practice in CITES, and (2) convening polarised stakeholders to guide policy decisions for high-valued traded species, focusing on rhinos and pangolins.

## *Background*

### *Linking theory to practice in CITES*

CITES operates by including species on one of three appendices with corresponding trade regulations, based on an evaluation of species' extinction risk. These decisions are guided by the CITES 'listing criteria'. Yet, despite the criteria being science-based, these major policy decisions are based almost exclusively on assumptions that lack an underlying evidence base about the probable consequences of regulatory changes, which may be positive or negative in various ways. For instance, decisions are typically made without due consideration of the social-ecological systems in which exploitation and consumption occur and overlook critical insights from economic and criminological theory, which could inform likely outcomes. To have confidence in future international wildlife trade controls, such as those adopted in CITES, there is a need to understand the conditions under which these decisions would be likely to be effective, or not, and the factors determining their efficacy.

### *Convening polarised stakeholders to guide policy directions for high-value traded species*

The use, trade, and consumption of high-value species including elephants, rhinos, lions, and pangolins is a highly contested issue among international conservation stakeholders. Some favour the sustainable use and trade of such species based on the potential accrual of conservation benefits, including revenue generation for conservation. Others oppose the consumptive use and trade of such species for all purposes in all contexts. However, to date, there has been very limited effort to convene key but disparate stakeholders to explore opposing worldviews, differences of opinion relating to uncertain outcomes, and the available scientific evidence, in order to inform future policy options for the conservation of high-value traded species. Such stakeholders include government agencies in range



countries, landowners, traders, wholesalers, retailers, and consumers. An exception is research conducted in 2018 on lion trade by Michael 't Sas-Rolfes from the University of Oxford, who used the techniques of participatory scenario planning pioneered by the Saïd Business School, and demonstrated the potential for assisting with global policy decisions by convening key stakeholders in this way.

Rhinos are threatened throughout their range by poaching for their horns, which remain highly valued in East Asian markets for medicinal and ornamental purposes, despite a worldwide trade ban, initiated by CITES in 1977. A resurgence in rhino poaching incidents from 2007 onwards has been somewhat contained through substantial responsive security measures. However, such measures bear a high socio-economic cost and it is unclear that rhino numbers can be maintained at current levels. An increasing number of rhinos now survive under intensive private protection, with security measures including regular trimming of horns. A majority of surveyed private rhino owners believe that the trade ban is ineffective and argue for the legalisation of rhino horn trade from sources that include commercial breeding operations. However, such suggestions are strongly opposed by prominent international NGOs and governments with strong influence in CITES, such as the USA. Meanwhile, private companies are moving forward with developing synthetic rhino horn, with the intention to "flood the market". All these initiatives are taking place in the absence of substantial research into the dynamics of the rhino horn market and with very limited understanding of the effects of such actions on demand for wild-harvested horn (and therefore on the incentives for poaching and trade). There is a compelling need to break the impasse and chart a sensible and inclusive way forward to avoid further serious attrition of rhino populations. At least some of the disagreement over policy relates to uncertainty and differing perceptions of risk, partly grounded in limited understanding of trade dynamics and probable responses to policy change. The rhino trade policy case study is thus ideal for this project.

Pangolins are trafficked in high volumes in the illegal wildlife trade from both Africa and Asia and largely to East and Southeast Asia. Overlooked by mainstream conservation until around 2010, they are now receiving increasing conservation attention and funding. However, there is a spectrum of worldviews on the most appropriate policy responses to ensure the conservation of pangolins, and stakeholder positions are increasingly polarised. The eight species of pangolin are listed on CITES Appendix I, prohibiting international, commercial trade in wild-caught pangolins and their derivatives, and many local, national, and international organisations (e.g., NGOs) are opposed to any consumptive use of pangolins for any reason in any context. By contrast, there is a legal market for pangolin scales in China, where they have been used as an ingredient in traditional medicine for millennia. In this context, the current trajectory for international pangolin conservation is one of increasing polarisation and conflict over the use and trade of pangolin scales, and pangolins provide a contemporary and policy-relevant case study.



## *Objectives*

The specific research objectives of this project comprise the following:

1. Evaluate the extent to which social-ecological factors have been considered in decisions to amend the CITES Appendices in the last 22 years.
2. Develop an evidence-based theory of change to identify the conditions under which amendments to the CITES Appendices would be likely to contribute to improving the status of species.
3. Convene disparate stakeholders to guide policy directions for high-value traded species. This research will apply participatory scenario planning techniques to two species groups, rhinos and pangolins.
4. Propose reforms to CITES to ensure a robust evidence base underpins future decision-making and policy development.

## *Methods*

The project will critically evaluate the CITES listing criteria to identify provisions for including socio-ecological considerations in decisions to amend the appendices, as well as the extent to which proposals from CoP10 (1997) to CoP18 (2019) have explicitly considered these factors.

The project will proceed with the development of a conceptual socio-ecological systems model to map how CITES trade controls fit in – and interact with – these systems. This will be used in conjunction with existing knowledge and literature to develop a theory of change, which will identify the conditions under which different trade controls (e.g., trade bans, strict regulation of trade) would be most likely to be effective and contribute to the conservation status of species. This would consider myriad factors across the enabling conditions, actions and outcomes in order to achieve the impact, including law enforcement effort, governance, transparency, species knowledge, incentives for harvest and trade, and the nature of consumer demand.

International workshops will be held to conduct formal scenario planning for rhinos and pangolins respectively, including the construction of decision support tools (e.g., Bayesian Network models) with which to inform formal international decision-making and policy development.

Using the evidence base generated from the above research, we will propose reforms to CITES in order to ensure that an appropriate evidence base underpins future decision-making on trade controls for traded species.



## *Outputs, Tools and Guidance*

Findings from this project will help inform reforms to CITES to ensure that decision-making is underpinned by a robust evidence-base, and that decision-makers understand the conditions under which amendments to the CITES Appendices will be likely to be effective, or not.

Key outputs include:

- Policy briefs and information documents for policymakers, including for dissemination during the run up to, and at, the CITES CoP19 meeting.
- Reports of scenario workshops and guidance materials on how to deploy these novel methods for wildlife trade, aimed at governments and conservation practitioners.
- Between two and four research papers in high-impact academic

journals. *Team members and roles*

This project is one component of the Oxford Martin Programme on the Illegal Wildlife Trade. This programme has several interrelated projects that focus on changing the consumption of illegal wildlife products and addressing illegal wildlife trade more broadly. The overall programme brief is available [here](#).

**Prof E.J Milner-Gulland** ([ej@milner-gulland@zoo.ox.ac.uk](mailto:ej@milner-gulland@zoo.ox.ac.uk)), Principal Investigator, Oxford – E.J is responsible for overall delivery of the project.

**Dr Dan Challender** ([dan.challender@zoo.ox.ac.uk](mailto:dan.challender@zoo.ox.ac.uk)), Oxford Martin Fellow, Oxford – Dan is responsible for leading research on consideration of social-ecological factors in CITES decision-making, developing the theory of change identifying conditions under which CITES may improve the status of species, and for convening stakeholder workshops.

**Mr Michael 't Sas-Rolfes** ([tsas.rolfes@gmail.com](mailto:tsas.rolfes@gmail.com)), Oxford Martin Fellow, Oxford – Michael is responsible for contributing to developing the theory of change identifying conditions under which CITES may improve the status of species, and for convening stakeholder workshops.



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