

Developing countries kick back against eco-colonialism

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The 16 nations of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) have threatened to withdraw from the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), saying that it threatens national interests. Brazilians also resent foreign meddling with their conservation of the Amazon rainforest.



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At the end of the 18th Conference of the Parties (COP18) to the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora (CITES), the Tanzanian delegation took the floor to deliver an impassioned declaration on behalf of the 16 nations of the Southern African Development Community. The brief speech is worth quoting in full:

“This Declaration is made to express the grave concern that the SADC Parties mentioned here have with regards to the implementation of this Convention.

“As members of the global multilateral system and democratic, representative governments, we are obliged to ensure that we meet our commitments to all these international agreements and declarations to which

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“Recognising that CITES is one of the oldest wildlife and trade agreements, we are obliged to give it due consideration but within the context of subsequent and contemporary agreements and declarations to which it bears relevance and to which we are also signatories.

“CITES in its Preamble accepted the principle of: ‘Recognising that peoples and States are and should be the best protectors of their own wild fauna and flora’ and the Convention on Biological Diversity 1992 in Article 3 provides that: ‘States have, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and the principles of international law, the sovereign right to exploit their own resources pursuant to their own environmental policies, and the responsibility to ensure that activities within their jurisdiction or control do not cause damage to the environment of other States or of areas beyond the limits of national jurisdiction.’

“We contend that CITES, in form, substance and implementation, is not aligned with other international agreements of equal weight and arguably greater relevance to the challenges of today. These agreements emphasise the following principles:

- sovereignty over the use of national resources;*
- inclusive, equitable development through the sustainable use of natural resources;*
- recognising that rural communities living with wildlife have inalienable rights over the use of their resources; and*
- recognising that in today’s world of rapid changes in climate and land use and the accelerating pace of transformation of wildlife habitat, the survival of wildlife depends on the perceptions and development needs of people living with wildlife.*

“The way CITES is currently operating is contrary to its founding principles. Today CITES discards proven, working conservation models in favour of ideologically driven anti-use and anti-trade models. Such models are dictated by largely Western non-State actors who have no experience with,

responsibility for, or ownership over wildlife resources. The result has been failure to adopt progressive, equitable, inclusive and science-based conservation strategies. We believe this failure has arisen from the domination of protectionist ideology over science decision-making within CITES.

“This anti-sustainable use and anti-trade ideology now dominates decisions made by many States who are party to CITES. States are increasingly influenced by the dominance both at meetings of the decision-making structures of CITES and in their run-up by protectionist NGOs whose ideological position has no basis in science or experience and is not shared in any way by the Member States of SADC and their people.

“This conservation model is based on entrenched and emotive rhetoric and discourse, backed up by intense lobbying, as opposed to science. Foremost among these motifs now dominating CITES is the unfounded belief that all trade fuels illegal, unsustainable trade, ignoring clear evidence to the contrary. 📍

“Examples of this are the attempts by others to impose new trade restrictions for species that are effectively conserved – and utilised – in our States, such as lions and giraffe, while the real threats in those States where such species are in decline due to habitat loss and human-wildlife conflict continue to go unattended.

“The Southern African countries have observed, with great discomfort, the polarised discussions on African charismatic large mammals at this CoP18. It is very disturbing to see the North/South divide across the African continent rearing its head again.

“We are further concerned that positions of some Parties appear to be based on national political considerations aimed at catering to the interests of national, intensively lobbied constituencies, as opposed to proven, science-based conservation strategies. This undermines the SADC States, on whom the responsibility to manage species falls, and our ability to do so effectively. As it is currently implemented, CITES undermines the rights of people living in rural areas of SADC States to have access to and use in a sustainable manner the natural resources present in their communities that are required

to enjoy adequate living conditions and the right to participate in the management of these resources. The consensus expressed through CITES by the majority of States undermines our region in our efforts to secure social and environment justice through the sustainable use of our natural resources. In doing so it is compromising our ability to meet obligations and responsibilities to other multilateral agreements and to our peoples.

“The populations of iconic African wildlife species in our region illustrate the effectiveness of our conservation models. Similar examples of successful conservation outcomes have not been forthcoming under ideologically driven approaches to conservation. Yet, at previous meetings of the Conference of the Parties to CITES, efforts made by us to advance and strengthen the same conservation strategies that have worked so well have been rejected.

“Those who bear no cost of protecting our wildlife, nor bear any consequence for decisions of CITES on our species, vote without any accountability against working conservation models in southern Africa. To this end, we have had to invoke measures such as announcing a dispute, the first time ever in CITES. As members of the global community, we fully appreciate the importance of multilateral negotiations, such as those that take place within CITES, in identifying and collectively working towards solutions for the greater good of humanity.

“We have been committed Parties to CITES since its inception or our accession to it and would wish to remain so. But we can no longer ignore these glaring shortcomings and threats to our national interests and to our commitments to the broader multilateral context. Mr Chairman, the time has come to seriously reconsider whether there are any meaningful benefits from our membership to CITES. I thank you.”

A threat to leave CITES – a move for which I have advocated in the past (<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2016-08-23-african-nations-should-withdraw-from-cites/>) – is no small thing. It will have very significant consequences, such as the possibility that remaining member countries simply refuse to trade with non-members, especially in products derived from wildlife ranching and conservation.

But, heavily influenced by Western environmentalists and animal rights ideologues, the CITES countries have consistently interfered with the sovereign right of developing countries to manage the conservation of their wild ecosystems in such a way that their conservation or development also benefits their own people.

Rich countries do so because it plays well with their political constituencies at home, and many poor countries vote alongside them because millions of dollars in conservation funding and other aid from large environmental groups are dependent upon meek compliance. This leaves the few countries that actually do have charismatic megafauna to protect without enough votes to protect their own national interests.

As Ed Stoddard recently put it in (<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-08-30-megafauna-stalemate-calls-for-fresh-thinking-as-cites-conference-ends/>) *Daily Maverick* (<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-08-30-megafauna-stalemate-calls-for-fresh-thinking-as-cites-conference-ends/>), “fresh thinking is clearly needed” to resolve the “megafauna stalemate”. To do this, “focusing on communities is key,” according to Duan Biggs, senior research fellow for social-ecological systems and resilience at Griffith University, and Matthew H Holden, lecturer in the Centre for Applications in Natural Resource Mathematics at the University of Queensland, writing in (<https://theconversation.com/its-time-to-break-the-deadlock-over-africas-ivory-trade-heres-how-122153>) *The Conversation* (<https://theconversation.com/its-time-to-break-the-deadlock-over-africas-ivory-trade-heres-how-122153>).

Conservation does not emerge from foreigners dictating to developing countries how to manage their natural resources, or prohibiting them from the sustainable utilisation of nature and wildlife. Sustainable use is a key principle that CITES once promoted, but has long since abandoned in favour of a preservationist ideology promoted by green lobby groups and politicians pandering to their rich-world constituencies.

A similar pushback can be seen in Brazil’s response to international pressure over fires in the Amazon rainforest. The G7 group of rich countries, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK, and the US, patronisingly and without being asked

to do so, agreed on a plan to save the Amazon

(<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/26/g7-leaders-agree-plan-to-help-amazon-countries-fight-wildfires>).

Brazil's president, Jair Bolsonaro, reacted angrily, accusing French president Emmanuel Macron of treating his country like "a colony or no-man's land".

A sizeable majority of Brazilians, in fact, approve of how their president has handled the fires and the threat of foreign meddling.

"Ironically, this crisis may have increased Bolsonaro's popularity because of his nationalism grounded in the threat of losing control over the Amazon to foreigners," Welber Barral, a lobbyist and former Brazilian foreign trade secretary, told Reuters (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-brazil-environment-politics-analysis/amazon-fires-scorch-bolsonaros-reputation-abroad-but-not-in-brazil-idUSKCN1VJ2JQ?feedType=RSS&feedName=topNews>).

Brazil, like Africa, has to contend not merely with the need for conservation, but also the need to develop its economy and raise the living standards of its people. This means having to consider where and how to develop land, to what purpose, and how this can be reconciled with the conservation needs of sensitive areas like the Amazon. If it was up to foreigners, the locals could hang if that would preserve the Amazon in its present state.

With all the hysteria among Western media and politicians, you'd think there's an actual crisis going on. August 2019 did see the highest number of fires in August since 2010, but there were more fires in September 2017. What changed? Why no outrage then? It couldn't be that media, celebrities and politicians are merely playing dirty politics by reacting to the election of a right-wing president, could it?

The incidence of fire in the Amazon is, in fact, relatively low compared to the first decade of the 21st century under socialist president Lula da Silva. It looks like 2019 will end with fire numbers comparable to those of 2012, 2015 and 2017, none of which were particularly alarming.



The deforestation rate of the Amazon is also at a low. Although there has been a slight rise in the last few years (before Bolsonaro took office), it is much lower than it was in the decades between 1988 and 2008.



The only potentially alarming data point I could find is that one of the agencies that monitors Amazon deforestation recorded a sharp uptick for the single month of July 2019. That uptick was not noted by the other agencies, and may well prove to be a flash in the pan. It certainly doesn't seem to be enough to justify global hysteria. The rest of the monthly data does not show any notable increase over previous years in the first six months of Bolsonaro's presidency, either.



It is no surprise, then, that Brazilians are offended at the high-handed opprobrium directed towards their country by rich nations and Western environmental groups. They also have good reason to believe that foreign countries have base economic reasons for trying to impose environmental regulations that deter the expansion of Brazilian agriculture. The last thing foreign politicians want is aggressive competition for their own farmers.

It is high time that the developed world rejects the preservationist ideology of Western environmentalists and demands a return to conservation based on sustainable use that still, on paper, forms the basis for global conservation and biodiversity treaties. Any conservation policy that does not take into account the needs of local communities and domestic economies is doomed to failure. ●

Preserving an imagined Eden for the satisfaction of rich-world elites, at the cost of the socio-economic development of people in poor countries, is morally reprehensible and politically unworkable.

The developing world does not need, and its people are refusing to accept, patronising instructions on conservation and conditional offers of "aid" from what one can only call eco-colonialists. Developing countries must put their own people and development first, and pursue home-grown sustainable use policies that have proved to be successful in the past, global opinion be damned. **DM**

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Ivo Vegter is a columnist and the author of *Extreme Environment*, a book on environmental exaggeration and how it harms emerging economies. He writes on this and many other matters, from the perspective of individual liberty and free markets.

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Rory Short 1 month ago

The fact is humans evolved in concert with all other life forms. In other words we are all part of one successful eco-system so if we have any sense at all we would be very cautious indeed about destroying any other part of it as that might trigger off our own demise.

Stephen Hall 1 month ago

Dear Ivan van Heerden, your argument laying out clear concise alternatives to Ivo's report certainly has me convinced. I particularly enjoyed the way you avoided spouting ad hominem insults and used verifiable facts as well as named sources for your rigorously researched stance to defeat his wildly unreasonable position. - Not.

Ivan van Heerden 1 month ago

Yes leave Cites, I mean Screw the animals being poached in their thousands, Who needs Rhinos anyway, or Lions. With pesky Cites out the way we can plough ahead with breeding captive lions for the Chinese bone trade and canned hunting, never mind the 100 million sharks being finned every year. Here's an idea Mr Vegter, why don't you champion population control and stopping habitat loss, two things contributing significantly to the pressure on wildlife instead of writing absolute twaddle? African countries sell out to whoever pays them the biggest bribe, if you think legalising trade in wildlife is going to help conservation I suggest you try smoking your socks less, it's clearly interfering with your brain.

William Stucke 1 month ago

Did you actually read the article, Ivan? Or any of the other articles debating conservation issues? No, you seem to be making things up to suit your preconceived world view. More facts and less ad hominem vitriol would be useful. Otherwise, you are simply one of the eco-colonialists that Ivo is writing about. And suggesting that the SADC states, who have to bear the actual costs of actual conservation, should be allowed to make up their own minds without interference from ignorant emotional armchair conservationists who have no skin in the game (pun intended).

Julian Howard 1 month ago

The intransigence of the "do-gooders" in CITES and their inability to show any flexibility will have catastrophic effects when countries start leaving the Convention. This WILL happen and will severely damage many of the species that the Convention professes to protect. Wake up CITES

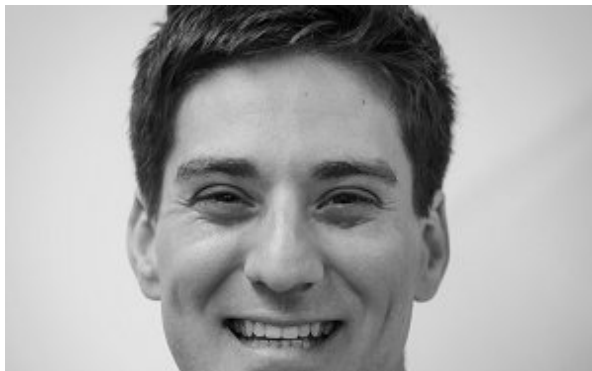
Ivo Vegter 1 month ago

I agree. It *can* do much good, but it doesn't.

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