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"Banning everything is not the way forward"

Protecting animal and plant species from overexploitation through trade: this is the goal of the multilateral convention, CITES. Mathias Lörtscher, head of the Swiss Delegation, talks about Asian snakes in Ticino and the benefits of electronic licenses.

Mr Lörtscher, you are the head of the area of species conservation and third-country imports at BLV. Given your role, one might expect Switzerland to take a pretty hard line in Johannesburg and advocate banning trade wherever possible.

Our attitude at the CITES conference follows a clear direction: fauna and flora are to be preserved and used sustainably. However, banning everything is not the way forward. We differentiate and define our various positions based on scientific principles. Both the threat level faced by animal and plant species and the trade criteria are paramount for us.

Can you give an example of this differentiated position?

Let's take the African elephant. The Southern African states, which have stable and, in some cases, growing populations, would like to discuss a controlled ivory trade. However, other African countries with small elephant herds which are continuing to dwindle are pleading for a comprehensive trade ban. As the Swiss delegation, we on the one hand represent the opinion that the timing is wrong to relax trade regulations in the face of poaching and a flourishing illegal trade. On the other hand, we believe it would be a mistake to impose a blanket ban on all trade.

You're looking for some middle ground then?

Yes, and something in keeping with the sustainability we've been talking about. That means measures should be taken to tackle the problems behind the ivory trade at source. We are thinking about things like influencing demand, combating corruption, preventing local trade of illegal ivory and improving enforcement of any provisions which apply.

As an outsider, it is hard to see how ivory trading and smuggling would apply to Switzerland.

Not every animal and plant species protected by CITES concerns every member state in the same way – hardly surprising, given there are around 5,000 animals and 29,000 plant species. Switzerland, for example, is directly concerned with the trade of Asian snakes from Indonesia, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Malaysia. That's because Switzerland's watch and luxury goods industry in places like Jura and Ticino makes it one of the most important import and export hubs for reptile leather. BLV issues around 115,000 permits each year for these alone. Switzerland has been leading one of the CITES working groups that deals with this line of trade since 2010. A resolution for stronger regulation and monitoring is now on the agenda in Johannesburg. The key words here are sustainability, traceability and legality.

115,000 licenses a year just for reptile leather. How does BLV cope with such a number? And does this really prevent illegal trade?

The number is indeed large. But the main point is, with less administration, there would be more capacity for the really important things – monitoring, prosecutions, training and public relations. BLV, therefore, is increasingly using electronic licensing procedures and aiming for a paperless trade. It is important for us that the other CITES states are heading in the same direction. And since we are chairing the relevant working group, we are in the right place to contribute to this. Electronic licenses

are more forgery-proof and verifiable in comparison to their paper counterparts. Therefore, they are an important contribution to the fight against illegal trade.

The public is becoming increasingly aware of fishing as an issue. Is this the case for CITES too?

Yes. In Johannesburg, we are discussing multiple requests for species of sharks and rays as these are sometimes heavily fished for the trade of shark fins and gill tracts. Switzerland has a positive stance towards these requests.

When talking about species conservation, it's often concerning animals. What about plants?

Yes, you immediately think of animals when talking about protecting species. But CITES does not exclude plants. There are almost six times more plant species than animals listed in the CITES appendices, particularly species of cacti and orchids. Wood from tropical forests that is being used for commercial purposes has increasingly come under the protection of CITES over the last few years. This year's conference will be discussing multiple requests aimed at bringing tropical deforestation to a sustainable level – which is exactly what we're about.