

Elephant policy shows oligarchic insanity

by Lydia Cherry

Plans put forward by Zimbabwe, Malawi, Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa, and later by the four southern states minus South Africa, to resume a limited elephant trade based on animal husbandry, a plan thus far most perfected in South Africa, were smashed by environmentalists and Anglophiles at a wildlife conference in Japan in early March. Several southern African countries are now weighing whether to withdraw from the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES).

"The CITES conference is a prelude of what will happen in June" at the so-called Earth Summit, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, a senior official of the U.N. Environment Program told a reporter at the March 2-13 convention in Kyoto. Such a prediction is indeed ominous. At a time of unprecedented food shortages and severe drought—all five countries now desperately need foreign exchange to import food to keep their populations alive—the oligarchic mentality shown in the decision to maintain game reserves at all costs represents malicious insanity.

The proposal to downlist to Appendix II to permit controlled trade was withdrawn after it was announced by the chairman of CITES that 15 countries, including the United States and Britain, had already announced they would veto any downlisting. Indeed, U.K. Environment Secretary Michael Heseltine had said as early as February that London opposed any modification on the now three-year ban on trade in elephant ivory.

Botswana's Minister of Commerce and Industry, Wildlife, and Tourism Ponatshego Kedikilwe, told the conference March 10 that his country had implemented the criteria adopted in 1989 to list the species on Appendix II and that a panel of experts set by CITES concluded that the countries had viable and healthy elephant populations. "We are extremely perplexed," he said. "It seems the goalposts have been moved."

It remains to be seen if any of the countries will withdraw from the wildlife policing organization. Even the chairman of Zimbabwe's Ivory Manufacturers Association, Jason Cambitzis, recommended March 16 that his government "remain in CITES and fight within," because withdrawing "would affect tourism and have far-reaching effects on us even from donors."

That the southern African countries lost in their downlisting attempt is ironic, in light of the fact that Japan, with backing from industrialized countries, blocked a similar proposal

to ban trade in the Atlantic blue-fin tuna. "What this shows is that the rich North cannot take what it expects the poor southern countries to take," noted a member of the World Wide Fund for Nature, one of a large number of environmentalist U.N. non-governmental organizations that are beginning to break ranks and lining up with "North" or "South."

The case for downlisting

Gail Amvot of the Wildlife Society of Zimbabwe argued: "Africa is always pictured with a begging bowl. But Zimbabwe's successful wildlife management methods, based on the principle that wildlife can support itself, has proved that foreign exchange can be earned through the carefully monitored export of wildlife instead of depending on western aid."

The southern African countries have lobbied for the downlisting for over six months. Nigel Hunter, deputy director of Botswana's Department of Wildlife and National Parks, told U.S. congressmen in September that his nation's preserves can sustain just 55,000 elephants. Botswana's elephant population rose from 40,000 in 1981 to 67,000 in 1989 and it has gone up from there. "The growing population of elephants is causing increasing conflicts, and we want to take the decision more in favor of the humans who live alongside the elephant," he said.

Rowan Martin, director of research at the Zimbabwean National Parks Department, at a workshop in Cambridge in January organized by the World Conservation Union, challenged biologists to name a single species that has benefitted from a CITES listing. After several moments of embarrassed silence, a handful of species were put forward, it was later reported.

On hand to commend the decision against downlisting was political insider and anthropologist Richard Leakey, who has created a paramilitary environmental police of over 300 who use anti-personnel mines, grenade launchers, and other weaponry against suspected poachers in Kenyan wildlife parks. Leakey was heard in the United States on National Public Radio insisting that a future relaxation of the ban should not even be hinted at. Leakey's campaign of killing poachers to protect elephants was key in winning the elephant ban in 1989.

Leakey, a large landowner in Kenya, was interviewed by *New York Times* columnist Flora Lewis in January 1990. Writes Lewis: "The population growth here, at 4% a year, is the world's highest. . . . Thoughtful conservationists are aware that the pressure for land in a country that is nearly the size of Texas and only 20% arable will make it increasingly difficult to maintain huge wilderness reserves. Richard Leakey, director of the Kenyan Wildlife Department, is seeking to promote support for conservation by making people aware that tourism, the biggest earner of foreign currency, depends on the existence of big safari parks with exotic animals. . . . Leakey sees the implications of dizzying [human] population growth, only marginally slowed by efforts so far."