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Breaking bad. And good news the maverick way

5 October 2016 08:00 (South Africa)

DAILY MAVERICK

(<http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/>)

Opinionista Ivo Vegter

R.I.P. the African Grey parrot

- Ivo Vegter



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Ivo Vegter

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. He is seldom wrong.

- 05 Oct 2016 12:17 (South Africa)
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After 35 years of failure to protect African Grey parrots by restricting trade, CITES has voted to double down by banning commercial international trade altogether. Meanwhile, it rides roughshod over African nations, and blithely oversteps its mandate by trying to meddle in domestic affairs of member countries.

A few weeks ago, I suggested that African nations should withdraw from CITES. It has become little more than a front for international animal rights lobby groups who wield political power in rich countries, and dictate to African countries from afar. It is the new colonialism, through which rich elites can command and control poor nations.

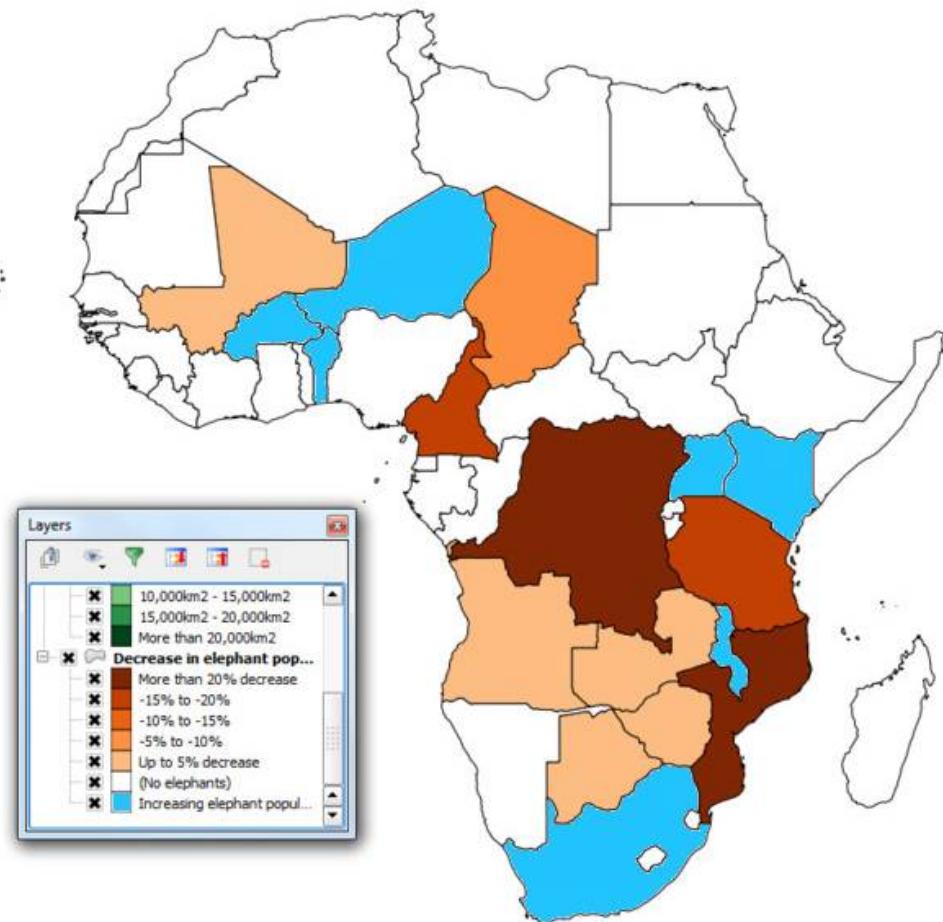
Now John Scanlon, the secretary-general of CITES, also warns that some African countries may pull out of CITES. “If multiple countries reject the elephant-related provisions, they can trade with each other outside the terms set up by CITES,” he told the media (<http://southernfrican.news/2016/10/02/cites-chief-warns-of-split-in-elephant-row-sa-namibia-and-zimbabwe-suffer-reversal/>).

Let's hope so.

Part of the problem is that the public in the rich world is not particularly well-informed on the conservation of African game species. In fact, they are deliberately misinformed by environmentalists and the media, which leads to political pressure to enact policies that do not work, or actively undermine conservation in Africa.

For example, Bagheera calls itself “an education website about endangered species and the efforts to save them”. It was originally created with the aid of Microsoft, whose co-founder, Paul Allen, sponsored the Great Elephant Census, whose unscientific sensationalism about a 30% decrease in elephant numbers I criticised (<http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2016-09-28-cites-if-illegal-trade-is-a-crisis-make-it-legal/>) last week (<http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2016-09-28-cites-if-illegal-trade-is-a-crisis-make-it-legal/>). Bagheera describes both the Asian and African elephant as “endangered species”. This is not true. The two aren’t even in the same genus, and the African elephant is not endangered (<http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/12392/0>).

In a news article (<http://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-37456236>) about the divisions at CITES over ivory trade, the BBC published a map which purports to show the status of national elephant populations in Africa. To reinforce the narrative that elephant populations are everywhere in decline, the map uses a near-white colour for countries in which populations are increasing. Unless you have extraordinary eyesight, this deception can only be spotted by adjusting colour levels in a photo editor, which reveals South Africa, Malawi, Kenya, Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger to be countries in which elephant populations are increasing. Here is the same map with the missing colour converted to blue shading to indicate healthy and increasing elephant populations:



The map also fails to indicate stable populations, which may be why it falsely indicates that Namibia has no elephants at all. This kind of misinformation leads people to believe all elephants are endangered, when many populations are healthy and thriving.

So they donate to international animal rights NGOs, which are experts at using sensational headlines, dodgy statistics and emotional manipulation to raise funds. The resulting political power those NGOs wield over foreign politicians should be viewed with great distrust by people who actually have to live with, and conserve, Africa's animals. When a powerful country like the US, which has no elephants of its own, leads the campaign to reject African proposals on elephant conservation and ivory trade, it would be well to remember that it only does so for parochial political interests, fed misleading propaganda. Voting against the demands of the NGO bloc would expose their delegates to great sound and fury back home.

As expected, foreign countries, together with African states that have failed to protect their own elephants, have ridden roughshod over countries like Namibia and Zimbabwe, who with the support of South Africa and Zambia proposed to sell ivory from legally-held stockpiles. Although these countries have successful elephant management programmes in place, to the extent that some elephants pose a threat to their ecosystems (<http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2016-05-25-how-endangered-species-destroy-the-environment/>) because of overpopulation, the eco-colonialists seem eager to punish them for their success.

In fact, CITES went even further, by adopting a resolution (<http://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-37535717>) that calls upon all its members to close even their own domestic ivory markets. An international trade agreement, of course, has no business lecturing countries about domestic trade. Japan, rightly, told them to go hang.

The assembled delegates will also vote on a proposal, inexplicably supported by Botswana, to upgrade the healthy elephant populations of southern Africa to Appendix I, which would put the final nail in any legal trade or sustainable use, including hunting. While the vote has yet to be taken at the time of writing, I'm willing to bet the measure will pass.

Ron Thomson, a veteran conservationist and founding member of the True Green Alliance, expressed incredulity at the idea: "How will adding unneeded and unwanted extra protection of southern Africa's elephant populations help those that are in decline in west Africa? This is not how wildlife management works. Each population has to be managed according to its own merits. And if CITES insists on not allowing southern Africa's totally safe elephant populations to be managed according to their respective merits, then CITES is forcing the states of southern Africa to mismanage their elephants."

The problem is that many of the NGOs that wield the money and influence at CITES are not conservation organisations, but animal rights organisations that do not countenance sustainable use of animals.

"It appears to me that the direction that CITES is going in is one where the human rights charter has been burnt in favour of an animal rights and poachers charter," wrote Eugene Lapointe, former secretary-general of CITES and president of the International Wildlife Management Consortium, in an editorial.

Harbouring an ideological distrust of commercial markets, they haven't seen a trade ban they don't like. Some even campaign against eating meat and consider pet ownership to be cruelty to animals.

This may be what sparked the listing of the African Grey parrot on Appendix I. Native to equatorial Africa, the grey parrot is a very popular bird worldwide, because of its longevity, intelligence and ability to mimic human speech. The new listing will prohibit all commercial international trade in wild grey parrots. Presumably, that phrasing means trade in captive-bred parrots will remain legal.

Let's leave aside the fact that the IUCN Red List entry for the African Grey (<http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/22724813/0>) gives an estimated wild population of "between 560,000 and 12.7-million individuals". Sorry, but that isn't an "estimate". It isn't even a guess. Not

having the foggiest clue how many there are is no basis for evaluating the sustainability of trapping wild birds for the pet trade. The IUCN reckons that 657,000 were exported from range states in the 20 years from 1982 to 2001, with undocumented pre-export mortality estimates inflating the number to a million. This is either a sustainable 7% of the present wild population, or a catastrophic two thirds of it. Who

knows?

Besides, 87.5% of exported grey parrots are bred in captivity, according to the Oxpeckers Centre for Investigative Environmental Journalism (<http://oxpeckers.org/2016/09/3192/>). South Africa, which has never had a wild population, is the world's largest exporter by far, accounting for some 80% of the total export market.

What the listing of the African Grey really demonstrates is the failure of the approach CITES takes towards wildlife trade. The bird has been on Appendix II since 1981, which means international trade in the species has been strictly regulated for 35 years. Throughout this time, countries have been subject to export quotas designed to protect local populations in range states. Yet CITES now claims that despite this "protection", African Grey populations are in decline in 14 of 18 range states.

One of the worst-hit countries is Ghana, where between 90% and 99% of the population has disappeared since 1992 (<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ibi.12332/abstract>). The irony, however, is that throughout this time, a total export ban was in place, and only 35 exports were reported to CITES. Obviously, nobody in Ghana has a handle on the international trade in African Grey parrots.

Across Africa, tens of thousands of parrots have been exported in violation of quotas. Thousands have been exported in violation of total export bans. Thousands more had CITES export permits saying they were captive-bred, but came from countries with no known breeding facilities.

There is an incentive to circumvent CITES rules, because each bird is worth \$300 (over R4,000) on the open market. An incentive to break the rules exists even for parrot breeders, because young birds trapped in the wild need less time to mature and can easily be sold on as captive-bred parrots.

For over 35 years, CITES rules have done absolutely nothing to protect wild African Grey parrot populations. They certainly cannot do much against habitat destruction as agriculture expands in Africa, and if 90% to 99% of a population can vanish despite an export ban, it is clear they can't do much against trade. What CITES can do, however, is deprive Africans of a modest income, and ensure that poaching parrots becomes even more lucrative.

CITES's most notable successes, the vicuña and crocodilia, were to rescue species from the brink of extinction by encouraging private ownership, husbandry, and trade. Yet spurred on by radical ideologues in the environmental movement, it has kept doubling down on trade restrictions that simply do not work.

By banning or heavily restricting international trade in endangered species, CITES has not saved these species. All it achieved in the last few decades has been to drive illegal trade in flora and fauna up the charts to rival the black markets (<http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2012-01-03-lets-ban-bans-and-start-with-cites/>) in drugs, counterfeit money, weapons and humans.

Let's hear it for trade bans, poachers and smugglers! **DM**

- Ivo Vegter



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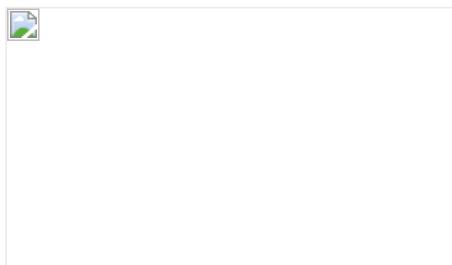
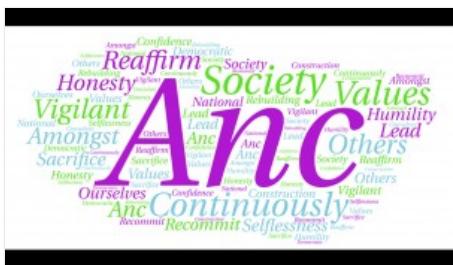
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