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Migratory Species Get Conservation Boost at International Wildlife Conference



New protection for sharks, whales and African wild dogs

Resolutions adopted to fight climate change, disturbances to marine mammals and bycatch in fishing gear

Rome/Bonn, 5 December 2008 – The future for 21 migratory species, from the reclusive Irrawaddy Dolphin to the Egyptian Vulture and the Cheetah, today got brighter under a UN wildlife treaty.

100 governments and 70 international NGO bodies met this week at the FAO (Food Agricultural Organisation) Headquarters in Rome for the ninth Conference of the Parties to the UN Environment Programme's (UNEP) Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS).

Proposals to strengthen conservation of endangered land and marine animals that cross international borders were considered and in most cases approved. Several dolphin and whale species were listed for the first time in Appendix I of the Convention, granting them full protection. Four shark species were added to Appendix II, signalling the need for better fisheries management and co-operation.

Alongside improved conservation for species, governments also adopted several resolutions including one to reduce noise pollution from vessels and other sources especially in habitat sensitive for whales, dolphins and other marine species. Measures to reduce accidental bycatch of non-target species in fisheries were at the centre of discussions.

Parties also agreed to give priority to negotiating new agreements on Pacific turtles and several species of sharks. A special inter-governmental meeting to discuss a sharks agreement will commence in Rome tomorrow. Earlier in the week an agreement to conserve the Andean Flamingo was signed by Bolivia, Chile and Peru, while the first Meeting of the Parties to the CMS Gorilla Agreement adopted Action Plans for the 4 gorilla subspecies and welcomed an offer of 200,000 Euros from Germany to support the agreement.

However, several countries attending the conference had very strict instructions on finance which meant that the Convention's plan to improve its capacities had to be scaled down, which led to protests from several NGO partners who support CMS.

The conference today approved a "scientific summary" dealing with Avian Influenza and other wildlife diseases, and listing the key findings of the Convention's Task Force on HPAI (Avian Flu), which is now chaired jointly by CMS and the FAO. This affects developing countries in particular, where animal keeping conditions can catalyze the emergence of such diseases and their transmission to humans.

Climate change and the special role of many migratory species as indicators of its detrimental effects will also receive increased attention from the CMS member states over the next years.

Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary General and Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) which administers the CMS, said: "Species that migrate across countries and continents are facing ever greater hurdles from loss of habitat and feeding grounds to unsustainable use and the unfolding and often complex threats emerging from climate change."

"Indeed the world is currently facing a sixth wave of extinctions mainly as a result of human impacts. Urgent and accelerated action is needed to ensure that a healthy, productive and functioning planet is handed on to the next generation," he added.

"The Convention on Migratory Species is an important part of our international cooperative response to such challenges. It reflects the shared responsibility of nations for these species as each year they attempt their epic journeys across continents and oceans".

Commenting on the final outcome of the conference, Robert Hepworth, Executive Secretary of UNEP-CMS, said: "The convention's development over the last three years has been remarkable – we have doubled our species agreements, trebled our project donations, and run our first high-profile global awareness campaign – Year of the Dolphin. 18 new countries have joined us in the global effort to conserve migratory species. The conference has shown its confidence in our strategy, and increased our budget modestly in real terms despite the global financial crisis.

However we now have to stretch our resources that much further still to protect the birds, mammals and marine creatures which journey around planet earth."

Racing against extinction

The Cheetah, the world's fastest land animal, today gained Appendix I listing across a large part of its migratory range although three African countries are expected to take out reservations on the listing.

The animal, which can reach speeds of up to 120 km/h, has suffered a dramatic 90 percent decline over the past century, becoming extinct in 18 countries of its original range. Less than 10,000 adult cheetahs now live in Africa while a meagre 50 survive in Asia, mainly around Iran's Kavir desert. Severe habitat loss, over-hunting and poor breeding in captivity are all to blame for cheetah's critically endangered status today.

The Appendix I listing will benefit from increased protection in some 80 per cent of the countries it inhabits.

The African Wild Dog has been eradicated from western and most of central Africa. Fewer than 8,000 animals are estimated to survive as a result of conflict with humans, other animals, as well as infectious diseases. Fences on their migration paths further endanger these roaming predators. An Appendix II listing agreed today calls on nations to establish regional agreements for their protection

Swimming against extinction

Seven cetacean species - more commonly known as whales, dolphins and porpoises were listed on CMS Appendices I and II at the conference. According to the recently published IUCN Red List nearly one quarter of dolphin species is threatened with extinction.

The reclusive Irrawaddy Dolphins used to inhabit coastal areas and estuaries throughout south-east Asia. But today, habitat loss, live capture, entanglement in fishing nets, electrocution and boat collisions put the survival of the remaining small populations at risk.

Unique to one of the most degraded marine environments in the world, the Black Sea Bottlenose Dolphin has also suffered from uncontrolled hunting and bycatch despite the ban on cetacean fishery in the sea since 1983.

The Irrawaddy and Black Sea Bottlenose dolphins secured Appendix I listing.

The Atlantic Humpback Dolphin also got Appendix I status while Clymene or Short-Snouted Spinner Dolphin, Risso's Dolphin, the Mediterranean population of the Bottlenose Dolphin and Harbour Porpoise were given Appendix II.

One of the world's most camera-shy species, the West African Manatee migrates in search of food as a result of changes in water levels in lagoons, rivers and sweet waters of Northern, West and Central Africa.

The manatees act as a key clean up and recycling mechanism of the river ecosystems by controlling floating algae and processing the limited nutrients. Although crocodiles and sharks occasionally kill manatees, their only significant threats are from humankind, such as poaching, bycatch, habitat loss, and other environmental impacts.

The Manatees listing on Appendix I complements the conservation efforts laid out in the CMS agreement on Western African small cetaceans and manatees concluded in October.

Furthermore, three shark species have been listed on Appendix II with some modifications or reservations. These are the two species of Mako Sharks, the Porbeagle Shark and the Spiny Dogfish, which continue to be seriously threatened by over-fishing. Sharks remain to be seriously endangered despite their indispensable role in oceans' ecosystems.

The populations of Spiny Dogfish, which is sold as "rock salmon" in fish and chips shops throughout Britain, have plummeted by more than 95 percent in the northeast Atlantic in just 10 years. The species is known for particularly slow reproduction rates with gestation lasting up to two year. It currently lacks any form of international protection.

Despite being one of the fastest swimming fish in the sea, Mako Sharks in the western and central Mediterranean have declined by over 96 percent in recent years. The Shortfin Mako is popular with anglers and shark fin soup lovers alike. A recent study reveals that up to one million Mako sharks enter the shark fin trade each year regardless of finning bans in 19 countries. This species urgently requires introduction of collaborative sustainable science-based fisheries management measures.

Flying against extinction

The Egyptian Vulture was granted Appendix I listing. Pesticides are to blame for the high mortality rates among these birds which get poisoned by feeding on carcasses of feral animals. Birds of prey such as falcons and vultures are important indicators of healthy ecosystems, and are most vulnerable to environmental changes and their disappearance from their habitat is a clear sign of a disrupted ecosystem.

In Latin America, the Peruvian Tern numbers have halved over the past decade, to less than 2,500 birds recorded in the twelve known breeding sites in Peru and Chile. The principal direct threat to the species is disturbance in its breeding grounds caused by human activities. Today it also secured an Appendix I status.

With a range spreading from South-East Asia to the Korean peninsula and Japan, Baer's Pochards - a duck considered a delicacy in Asian cuisine - number less than 5,000 and are in urgent need for legal protection all along its migration route. Governments responded to the threats by giving the bird an Appendix I listing.

Prized as hunting companions by royalty and the aristocracy, the Saker falcons have suffered an almost 70 percent decline since 1990. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan may have lost up to 90 percent of their populations to meet the increasing demand in falcons. Parties agreed today that the species will be actively monitored and assessed over the next triennium for potential listing in 2011.

Notes to editors:

UNEP/CMS is an international environmental Convention dedicated to the protection of avian, aquatic and terrestrial animals, which migrate across political borders. Countries which have become Parties to the Agreement commit themselves to implementing measures to conserve migratory animals and the habitats on which they depend.

Currently 110 Parties in Europe, Africa, America, Asia and Oceania have joined the Convention. Montenegro will shortly become the 111th Party.

Appendix I of the Convention lists migratory species in danger of extinction, while Appendix II lists species suffering from unfavorable conservation status and would benefit from international cooperation. In this respect, the CMS acts as a framework convention from which independent instruments evolve, including legally binding treaties to less formal instrument such as Memoranda of Understanding targeting regional or international cooperation. The development of models tailored according to the conservation needs throughout the migratory range is a unique capacity to CMS.

CMS Parties have committed themselves to strictly protecting these animals, conserving or restoring the places where they live, mitigating obstacles to migration and controlling other factors that might endanger them.

Documents relating to the 9th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) can be found at www.cms.int

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