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PRESS RELEASE

Experts urge stronger action to combat wildlife crime

Bangkok, 5 October 2004 – Representatives of an international group of law enforcement experts attending the ongoing meeting of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) will present their conclusions (today/tomorrow) about the threats posed by wildlife criminals to the survival of numerous plants and animals.

Consisting of 20 officials from national CITES Management Authorities, the CITES Tiger Enforcement Task Force, customs authorities, fishery protection authorities, intelligence agencies, the Interpol Wildlife Crime Working Group, the Lusaka Agreement Task Force police and prosecution and wildlife authorities from around the world, the group was tasked by CITES in 2002 to study how effectively the Convention is being enforced and to make recommendations for improvements.

The group's results make depressing reading:

- The illicit trafficking of wildlife continues at high levels and increasingly involves organized criminal networks, sophisticated poaching and smuggling techniques, fraudulent trade permits, corruption and violence towards enforcement officers;
- In many countries the authorities lack the necessary resources and experience to meet the challenge; and
- There is not enough coordination and information sharing amongst various enforcement authorities;

The experts are calling for:

- A recognition by governments of the seriousness of wildlife crime and a commitment by law enforcement authorities to give it a higher priority;
- Increases in the status, authority, training and quality of equipment of wildlife law enforcement personnel;
- Greater international and regional cooperation and better coordination of investigations;
- More use of and easier access to forensic science;
- More use of CITES enforcement task forces; and
- Increased support to the wildlife enforcement work of the CITES Secretariat, Interpol and the World Customs Organization.

"We are in danger of losing the war against wildlife crime, especially for some very rare animals and plants, unless modern professional law enforcement techniques are directed against criminals who care for nothing but profit, who exploit some of the world's poorest communities and take advantage of periods of civil unrest and instability," said CITES Secretary-General Willem Wijnstekers.



The conference will also hear about successes in the field of wildlife law enforcement. The Secretary-General of CITES has implemented a Certificate of Commendation to recognize some of the more exemplary enforcement actions. Since 2002, the Certificate has been awarded to:

- Customs officers and the CITES Management Authority of Hong Kong S.A.R. China following a significant seizure of ivory and the successful prosecution of the offender;
- An official of the ICPO-Interpol General Secretariat for his work in combating wildlife crime; and
- The US Fish and Wildlife Service's Division of Law Enforcement and the US Department of Justice's Wildlife and Marine Resources Section for their efforts in identifying and prosecuting individuals involved in the illicit caviar trade.

The illegal trade in wildlife remains the second greatest threat to the world's endangered species after habitat destruction. Many wildlife smugglers deal in products that are worth more, per kilo, than cocaine or heroin. Shawls made from the fine wool of the Tibetan antelope, for example, can cost over USD 15,000 each. The caviar trade is infested with organized crime networks.

"Senior enforcement officials seldom attend CITES meetings, and wildlife crime is rarely discussed at international conferences on crime. This must change," said Mr. Wijnstekers.

"There is a great deal of excellent work taking place around the world, but it is simply not enough. I hope that Bangkok will see a real commitment from countries to engage with us more energetically in the constant battle against wildlife criminals," he said.

Note to journalists: For more information, contact Juan-Carlos Vasquez at 229-3040 (Media Center - QSNCC) or +41-79-378-6540 (cell), juan.vasquez@unep.ch, or Michael Williams at 04-098-7621 (cell) or 229-3042 (office), or michael.williams@unep.ch. The relevant document (CoP13 Doc.23) will be examined in Committee II under agenda item 23 and is available at www.cites.org.

There will be a press briefing on this topic today at the auditorium of the QSNCC at 12:30.