

CUBA AND COP12

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This article was written in August 2002, when Cuba was about to go to the 12th Conference of the Parties to CITES (COP12) - for the third time - seeking permission to export its legally derived stockpile of hawksbill turtle shell. Bio-political events move fast and often in unpredictable directions (see postscript). Cuba withdrew its proposal (see postscript), and we withdrew the article from publication at the last minute. But the article had been circulated widely in the interim, and in the opinion of those who commented upon it, addressed issues that although now dated, are important. Accordingly, the article was placed on the WMI website.

At COP12 in November (Santiago, Chile), international trade in commercial fisheries resources will be discussed. Some Parties support the extension of CITES in this direction - others have reservations. Trade in hawksbill turtles will also be discussed. A commercial fisheries resource in the Caribbean, already on the Appendices of CITES. Hawksbills were placed on Appendix II in 1975 and shifted to Appendix I two years later.

Cuba has significant hawksbill resources and controlled its harvest historically. After joining CITES in 1990, it adapted its management in a strongly precautionary direction, reducing its harvest by over 90%. Despite achieving "sustainability", Cuba has been denied the ability to trade. At COP12 the Parties will once again discuss a conservative proposal by Cuba to trade, but the case history provides some sobering insights into process.

At CITES COP10 (1997) and COP11 (2000), Cuba proposed the transfer of hawksbill turtles (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) in Cuban waters from Appendix I to Appendix II. They needed a two-thirds (67%) majority of Parties to support them, and achieved 58% at COP10 and 64% at COP11. Their case was clearly well justified.

The United States of America and the IUCN Marine Turtle Specialist Group (MTSG) were the principle lobbyists against Cuba. Both can rightly take credit for Cuba's program heading towards bankruptcy today, despite TRAFFIC considering it a model program in the region. But the Cubans are made of sterner stuff. They are going to COP12 with another proposal, hoping commonsense will prevail.

That the USA would oppose anything "Cuban", or give accolades to Cuba for its achievements, reflects well-known political opposition to the Government of Cuba. But most countries do not share their view and nor do they have a desire to penalise Cuba whenever the opportunity presents itself - they vote against the USA position on Cuba within the United Nations.

MTSG opposition is a different matter. To the Parties to CITES this "appears" to have scientific credibility because it is linked to the IUCN, which is a prestigious organisation with a long history of promoting science in conservation. Indeed, people such as ourselves have volunteered man-years of work to the IUCN, because we believe in maintaining that credibility.

The IUCN Crocodile Specialist Group (CSG) is also nestled under the umbrella of the IUCN and like the MTSG provides scientific advice to the Parties of CITES. But the CSG does so in a transparent and open manner, with the minutes of all meetings made public, and the source of all funds acknowledged. It works closely with small nations and tries to help them achieve sustainable use in accordance with the IUCN Mission and the IUCN Policy on Sustainable Use.

Within CITES, the CSG supports programs it considers exemplary or which have good potential. If hawksbills were crocodiles, there is no doubt the CSG would give Cuba every assistance. When the CSG met in Cuba, and were exposed to Cuba's hawksbill program, they gave accolades for a job being well done against determined opposition.

The MTSG offers no help to nations interested in sustainable use of sea turtles. It sees its role as being a formidable antagonist to any nation which suggests either the IUCN Mission or Policy on Sustainable Use should be applied to sea turtles. Consumptive use and trade are viewed as being philosophically wrong. The MTSG continually demonstrates limited knowledge amongst its members of the principles of "sustainability" or wildlife and fisheries management. Manufacturing evidence to make their opposition seem more objective has become an art form.

To be fair, there are some reasonable people and skilled scientists within the MTSG. But their voice and role in MTSG politics is rarely heard. Perhaps they want to avoid the politics. The key MTSG members, mostly from the USA or tightly affiliated with the USA, plot and plan like a political party, with neither transparency, accountability nor a commitment to truth. They do not publish minutes like the CSG, nor do they release details of where their funds come from. Cuba's program has advanced in spite of this opposition, but is it any wonder some Parties to CITES are confused about hawksbills and Cuba's program?

Overcoming this confusion, created deliberately by the MTSG, prompted CITES to host two regional dialogue meetings to discuss hawksbill turtles in the Caribbean: the first in Mexico (May 2001) and the second in the Cayman Islands (May 2002). The IUCN was contracted by the CITES Secretariat to prepare three review papers for the first meeting - one each on biology, status and ranching. They allocated the task to the MTSG.

At the first dialogue meeting some aspects of the ranching paper were criticised. But serious criticism was focused on the status and biology papers. The status paper was out of date, lacked quantitative analysis of trends, ignored and downplayed recovering populations, and promoted the worst possible scenario for status - the MTSG advocacy position - despite available monitoring data not supporting that scenario!

The biology paper was even worse. It ignored data from Cuba and Mexico, in particular results indicating fast growth rates and highly flexible population

dynamics, both directly linked to the biological capacity of wild hawksbill populations to recover rapidly if given the opportunity. The MTSG was determined to avoid giving credit and accolades to Cuba for its efforts - something that became glowingly apparent to participants when Cuba summarised its diverse research and management activities.

In what must surely be one of the IUCN's lowest moments, a great deal of the meeting was spent discussing problems with the MTSG papers, which were finally rejected as being inadequate. The IUCN was requested to revise and update them for the second meeting.

Between the first and second dialogue meetings, countries such as Cuba provided the MTSG with a variety of unpublished scientific results in good faith. They assisted the MTSG with various analyses and devoted time and effort through an ad hoc discussion group in the hope that sound and objective reviews would result.

Cuba was not invited - not even MTSG members in Cuba - to check the final papers. The MTSG hierarchy, again working in secret, decided what they would tell regional Parties and what they would withhold from them.

The final papers were updates rather than revisions, with some new sections. Important issues discussed by the ad hoc group were ignored, and new sections not discussed by the group were included. The MTSG finally accepted that "fast growth rates" were a reality, demonstrating unequivocally that the original paper was flawed and indeed, that the long history of criticising Cuba over this issue was an MTSG error. The review failed to look at the implications of fast growth rates on population recovery rates, despite them being profound.

A new section on "movement" was pure MTSG advocacy. The goal was clearly to create an impression of a highly mobile species, although the available research data, particularly satellite tracking data, indicates this is not so, and further, that many historical conclusions drawn from "tag" returns are biased.

The second "status" paper ignored work done between the two meetings on quantifying the rate at which the Caribbean regional population as a whole was increasing. Not part of the MTSG's advocacy position, yet clearly a critical issue for a regional CITES meeting.

Again, the IUCN was requested to revise and correct the second papers, and much valuable meeting time was wasted. I personally know of no precedent where IUCN input has been considered so biased and inadequate. But the legacy remains. There are now four separate IUCN discussion papers on the biology and status of hawksbills emanating from the CITES dialogue meeting process. All are in the public domain complete with significant errors, selected omissions and internal inconsistencies. They are advocacy documents masquerading as scientific reviews.

In the interim, these flawed documents are being used as reference documents by Parties considering Cuba's COP12 proposal. So the MTSG has achieved its advocacy goal, regardless of what the IUCN thinks or does. Needless to say, the USA and WWF have already indicated they are accepting the MTSG opinions as fact, because they emanate from the IUCN. Whether the IUCN will formally withdraw the papers, as it should do, remains to be seen. Whether the IUCN will

distance itself from the extreme views of the MTSG when it reviews Cuba's COP12 proposal for the Parties remains to be seen.

Let us imagine for a moment - wild speculation - that the MTSG and the IUCN had supported Cuba in 1997. That they had welcomed Cuba's commitment to conservation, management and sustainable use, its leadership in research, and indeed, its tight embrace of the IUCN Mission. The last 5 years would then have seen major advances in hawksbill research, conservation and management in Cuba, with increasing levels of regional cooperation and commitment.

Had the MTSG genuinely tried to help Cuba, as the CSG would have done, and indeed did do with Cuban crocodiles - a species with a global wild population perhaps less than 1% of the wild hawksbill population - how much could have been achieved? Would Cuba's turtle program still be fighting for survival against competing needs for resources?

It stands as an anachronism that the one nation in the Caribbean which invested its own resources heavily in the conservation, management and sustainable use of hawksbill turtles, should be penalised by the IUCN - an organisation committed to achieving conservation and sustainable use.

If it is because the IUCN is concerned about "rocking its own boat" - the reaction of its members if it were to try and rein in MTSG excesses - perhaps its time to consider what most others have known for decades. The "plug" in the IUCN boat - IUCN credibility - is firmly in the hands of MTSG leadership. It is being pulled out further and further each year.

Postscript (September 2002)

On 19 August 2002, the Government of Cuba informed the CITES Secretariat that they were withdrawing their proposal to COP12. Despite unequivocal confidence in their program, regional confusion created through misinformation was considered a threat to a more important issue - regional solidarity.

The IUCN itself has taken strong action to try and rectify the blatant excesses of the MTSG. They have produced a consolidated draft paper on the biology and status, which removes much of the MTSG advocacy material. This paper is now under review, because there are many points of detail which need checking and validation. However, the MTSG clearly achieved their political goal of derailing the Dialogue Meeting process with misinformation.