

## News focus

# Conservation goals hampered

The meeting to control illegal trade in endangered species in Doha disappointed many researchers worried about the decline in numbers of several key animals and plants. **Nigel Williams** reports.

Much speculation preceded the meeting of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (Cites) in Doha last month with the bluefin tuna having the highest profile on the agenda. But Japan and other fishing nations inflicted defeat on the conservation countries led by the US and the EU that had wanted to ban the international trade in bluefin tuna. Monaco had proposed the ban on the basis of the dwindling numbers entering the Mediterranean to breed that are then hunted ferociously by fleets from many countries. Japan's victory, against the scientific opinion, not only raises the question of whether

the bluefin can survive but also whether scientific opinion can prevail in preventing commercially valuable species from being obliterated.

This decision overshadowed the meeting but other issues were aired. The meeting heard that the internet is also one of the greatest threats to rare species, fuelling illegal wildlife trade and making it easier to buy everything from live lion cubs to wine made from tiger bones.

One success was the overwhelming support for a ban on the trade of the Kaiser's spotted newt, which the Worldwide Fund for Nature says has been devastated by an internet pet trade. The animal

lives in only limited areas of Iran and wild numbers have plummeted.

One other success for conservationists at the meeting was the refusal to reverse the ban on trade in ivory stockpiles that had been sought by Zambia and Tanzania. Delegates at the meeting were concerned that the origin of these ivory stockpiles could not be confirmed.

The meeting also highlighted the growing involvement of organised crime gangs in the trade of precious timber, caviar, rare plants, rhinoceros horn and tiger skins and bones. The trade was discussed by enforcement experts from Interpol, customs agencies and governments attending the meeting.

But on another economically valuable species, the red coral,



**Defeated:** A proposal to regulate trade in red coral used to make jewellery was defeated at the Cites meeting. (Photo: Wolfgang Pölzer/Alamy)

a proposal to ban trade by Sweden and the US was defeated. The coral is harvested in the Mediterranean and elsewhere and turned into expensive jewellery in several Asian countries. The coral has no international protection, resulting in significant trade, according to the conservation group SeaWeb. Opposition to the coral trade ban was led by Japan, supported by coastal states, including Indonesia, Malaysia and Iceland, all of whom argued the corals are crucial to the survival of local communities and are not over-harvested.

But internet trade remained a main point of discussion at the meeting. A survey last year by the Campaign Against Cruelty to Animals targeted the internet trade in Ecuador, finding offers to sell live capuchin monkeys, lion cubs and ocelots.

“As the internet knows no borders, it causes new problems regarding the enforcement of the protection of endangered species,” the group said.

Willem Wijnstekers, secretary general of Cites said that the organisation was determined “that a new era of law enforcement is introduced. An era where those who rob countries and communities of their natural resources will face a determined and formidable opposition.” But the main focus and controversy of the meeting was the bluefin tuna and 12 other marine species.

Many thought the scientific case for a temporary ban on the fishing of bluefin tuna was compelling, with evidence that their population had now reduced to less than 15 per cent of historic levels. Two bodies, the scientific committee of the Atlantic tuna commission (ICCAT) and a special panel of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, agreed that the bluefin stock qualified for a ban. The problem for the EU and the US was that they thought a strong scientific case would be sufficient to lead to a ban. They did not realise the strength of the alliance against them in Doha. Observers now note that, in Cites, building alliances amongst the 175 member countries and buying votes has come to the fore and Japan’s determination to maintain the fishery won out.

## Worries over legal drugs

Mediawatch: **Bernard Dixon** looks at the reaction to the death of two British teenagers last month linked to the consumption of a legal drug labelled as plant food.

“Schools powerless over killer drug”, said *The Sun*’s page 1 headline on 18 March. “Horrified teachers are having to hand back deadly meow meow to pupils after confiscating it — because the drug is still legal,” said the accompanying report. “Worried school heads last night joined the families of teenage victims Nick Smith and Louis Wainwright in backing *The Sun*’s call to ban the drug, real name mephedrone. The demands came as the known UK death toll rose to five. Meanwhile, the Government was blasted as it emerged that a ban had been delayed for SIX MONTHS.”

Harriet Harman, the leader of the House of Commons, “yesterday snubbed calls for an immediate ban on killer legal drug meow meow,” the same newspaper reported the following day. “The Commons leader agreed it was ‘extremely dangerous’ — but sparked fury by insisting on waiting for an expert’s report before outlawing it.”

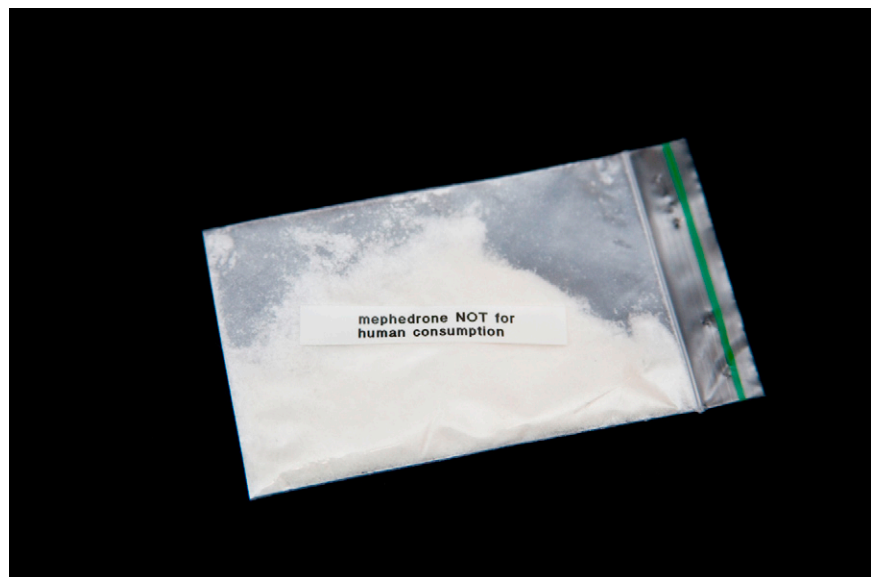
Rarely can there have been a more dramatic example of the media portraying a complex health issue in black-and-white terms and demanding action accordingly. The trigger was the deaths of two Scunthorpe teenagers after they had consumed mephedrone. The police stated that, pending post-mortem and toxicology tests, it was not possible to establish the extent to which the ‘legal high’ drug was a factor responsible for the deaths. Nevertheless, experts and regulatory committees have become increasingly concerned about possible hazards of these substances, which are derived from cathinone. They induce effects similar to those of amphetamine but have been less thoroughly studied.

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Meanwhile, several newspapers reported that a post-mortem on a 46-year-old man, who died in February, had shown that mephedrone did cause his cardiac arrest.



**Worries:** There are calls to make the drug mephedrone illegal in the UK. (Photo: Edd Westmacott/Alamy.)