

## TRAFFIC and WWF commend Lao PDR's decision to join CITES

8 April 2004...TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring network and WWF, the conservation organization, commend the decision made in early March by the Government of Lao People's Democratic Republic to join CITES, the world's leading conservation treaty regulating the international trade in endangered species.

"This means that CITES will for the first time be a common mechanism for international wildlife trade management and control throughout the region - a hugely positive step forward," says James Compton, the director of TRAFFIC Southeast Asia Regional Office. With Lao joining CITES, all 10 nations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are now committed to the same protocols governing international trade in wild species, their parts and derivatives.

TRAFFIC has assisted the government in paving the way for Lao PDR's accession to CITES since 1993, when it first developed a report guiding the government in this process. Since then, it has been working to encourage Lao's accession to CITES, in concert with its key partners, WWF and IUCN - The World Conservation Union.

In 2001, for example, TRAFFIC and WWF convened workshops on CITES for senior officials from 10 related government ministries and agencies on CITES regulations and forestry laws, as well as on threats to biodiversity in the country. Other project activities have included increasing awareness and understanding of the effects of illegal wildlife trade at all levels of government and improving law-enforcement capacity at border crossings and other field sites.

Following these efforts, both the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and the Science Technology Environment Agency made recommendations in favour of CITES accession, and the Prime Minister's Office issued a letter endorsing accession to the convention.

The government's recent decision to accede to CITES has been part of the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) process which has been underway in Lao PDR for the past two years. Now that the NBSAP is close to being finalized, WWF is encouraged to see the Government of Lao taking this significant step towards protecting the country's globally significant biodiversity and forest resources.

"After all of our collective efforts in demonstrating to Lao that becoming a Party to CITES will help towards the conservation of their natural resources, we are extremely encouraged by this latest development," says Julie Thomson, Deputy Director of TRAFFIC Southeast Asia.

As Lao PDR shares borders with five major wildlife producer and consumer countries in the region - namely Cambodia, China, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam - the country is an important route for cross-border wildlife trade in CITES-protected species such as Asiatic black bears, leopards, pangolins and primates, which often end up being used as ingredients in traditional medicines.

A 2000 TRAFFIC study, as well as ongoing trade monitoring, also indicate continuing trade in critically endangered Tiger and its parts to supply markets in Viet Nam and Thailand. Also worrying is the number of ivory products found on sale in Lao PDR, based on the most updated information available from ETIS, the CITES-mandated Elephant Trade Information System.

Lao PDR's accession could not come at a more opportune moment as the 13th Conference of the Parties to CITES (CITES COP 13) will be held for the first time in Southeast Asia when all

165 Parties gather in Bangkok for two weeks in October 2004. For the first time, the ASEAN nations can demonstrate their solidarity, commitment and leadership in addressing conservation and wildlife trade issues of regional importance.

In support of the on-going efforts, TRAFFIC and WWF are continuing to work with Lao PDR and other ASEAN nations to encourage actions that promote wildlife trade that is both legal and sustainable. Illegal trade in endangered species involves producer, consumer and re-export/transit countries within ASEAN, and with the wider CITES community. Addressing this diverse dynamic requires an integrated approach to share information, build capacity and raise awareness across a variety of stakeholders.

"TRAFFIC and WWF look forward to further encouraging and supporting countries in the region to work together towards mutual goals concerning better management of wildlife trade, which will benefit both the conservation of biological diversity and sustainable development", Compton concludes.

**SOURCE:**

Press Release from WWF and TRAFFIC

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