

EDITORIAL

The most important sessions of the 69th United Nations General Assembly concluded – as usual – just before the end of last year. The leading report of this issue provides a thorough overview of the large number of resolutions and decisions of interest to our readers.¹

Several organs of the United Nations, including the General Assembly, have passed resolutions on poaching elephants and rhinoceroses. Yet, it is still not enough. There is a dire need for more serious action.

The grave and multifaceted problems facing local populations, national governments and the international community are illustrated in a recent report published in the German magazine “DER SPIEGEL”². The Africa correspondent had intended to write a story on the global trade in ivory – from South Africa and Mozambique to Vietnam where ivory, especially ground rhino horn, is considered a symbol of wealth and an aid against impotence and numerous illnesses. However, during research, he was abducted in Massingir (Mozambique) by a lead poacher controlling not only the local police forces, but much of the local government. Having entered the poacher’s village without permission, the reporter and photographer were threatened with rape and murder. From this location 10 to 15 poaching units are regularly organized to venture into Krüger National Park under the cover of darkness to hunt down and hack off rhino horns, leaving the animals to die. The international “business” of trading in rhino horn is so lucrative and unemployment in remote areas so grave, that the crime of poaching goes unpunished.

This shows that growing demand for ivory and increasing poaching activities aren’t likely to cease simply due to resolutions of UN organs. Nonetheless, Gabon and Germany have organized high-level meetings in both 2013 and 2014 on the margins of the General Assembly’s General Debate. Furthermore, they have joined a “UN Group of Friends on Poaching and Illicit Wildlife Trafficking”, composed of approximately 20 states, seeking to follow-up on the call from last year’s UNEP Environment Assembly and introduce a resolution on the issue of illegal wildlife trade during this year’s session.

These efforts need to be taken further and implementing legislation adopted into national laws, so wildlife crime can be severely punished. Yet, more immediate and serious measures need to be taken. In this regard, I repeat what I have stated on several occasions: precious products of nature, such as ivory, should not be destroyed in efforts to counteract increasing demand. Destroying existing stockpiles is not an appropriate way of dealing with the problem of elephant and rhino poaching. The well-publicized practices of governments seizing, burning or crushing ivory only serves to artificially increase prices and thus embolden poachers to bring more products to market. We hope that ivory can one day be traded under a legal regime with the express purpose of funding programs to effectively operate anti-poaching programs that translate the invaluable benefits of these magnificent creatures into meaningful livelihoods for the people closest to them.

Preparations are progressing for COP-21/CMP-11 in Paris at the end of this year in hope of concluding a global climate treaty. The United Nations Secretary- General has set the goal of securing a meaningful, universal climate change agreement, while stressing the interdependence of climate change and sustainable development.

- Wolfgang Breyer -

¹ For additional background information we refer you to our database of UN documents concerning the environment at: https://www.iucn.org/about/work/programmes/environmental_law/elp_resources/elp_res_tools/un_documents/.
² Grill, B. 7 Mar 2011. Der Spiegel. Vol. 2015(11).