Indian Ocean - South-East Asian Marine Turtle Memorandum of Understanding

Profile of the Month

Twenty-five years with UNEP … a retrospective

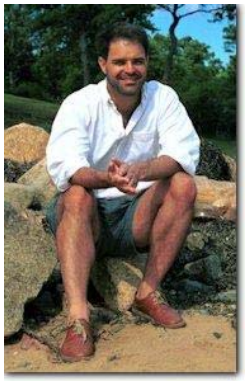
(Feb 2014)

Source: Douglas Hykle, IOSEA Coordinator

This past month, I celebrated twenty-five years of service with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). Although most of my career has been spent with the secretariat of the UNEP-administered Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), a few old-timers may recall that I actually started out as a junior officer in the secretariat of the sister Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), then based in Lausanne, Switzerland.

Fresh out of a university Masters programme and brimming with "green" enthusiasm and naiveté, I was soon thrust into the centre of the controversial debate about international trade in elephant ivory. Within months of my arrival in Lausanne in the summer of 1988, the senior CITES Ivory Control Officer resigned his post and I was left to administer a programme which sought to regulate the legal international sale of ivory and ivory products. Meanwhile, there were growing calls from conservation circles to ban the trade entirely, in the face of declining elephant populations and rampant illegal trade. Indeed, after much acrimonious debate, the 1989 CITES meeting decided to prohibit all international commerce in ivory.

When I attended the last CITES conference in Bangkok in 2013, I saw some of the same actors (and many new ones) still debating issues that were familiar to me nearly 25 years ago. Indeed, many of these challenges are linked to the never-ending debate about the merits of sustainable use vs. complete prohibition of trade: evidence of persistent illegal trade, insufficient resources for enforcement, and elephant populations in decline in parts of their range and exceeding carrying-capacity in others. These days, the latter argument seems to have the upper hand, as evidenced by an increasing number of symbolic public events to destroy ivory stockpiles.



It was a dream of mine, from about the age of 16, to work in the field of international wildlife conservation; and I channelled that ambition into the preparation of my 318-page Master's thesis, undertaken at Dalhousie University in Halifax, entitled: "An Evaluation of Canada's Implementation and Enforcement of CITES". I stand to be corrected but I believe that my thesis was the first scholarly publication in the world to comprehensively review a country's implementation of this influential treaty. (Many years later I confirmed that an American who was working on a PhD around the same time published after me.) Countless other reviews of CITES implementation have since followed.

Nearly 25 years after my seminal work was published in 1988, I was touched when a retired senior officer of the Canadian Wildlife Service contacted me in Bangkok, completely out of the blue, to tell me that he had referred to my thesis throughout his career, making it "required reading" for new recruits. At least, my youthful scholarly efforts didn't go completely unnoticed.

The unforgettable time I spent working in CITES was stimulating and professionally rewarding, helping to shape my views on nature conservation for years to come. Above all, CITES – perhaps like no other convention in existence – embraces the full spectrum of opinion (scientific and otherwise) about how best to protect, conserve and utilise the myriad of species that share our planet. With a BSc in wildlife biology, an interest in international policy and a Canadian-inspired sense of diplomacy, I felt comfortable listening to and mediating different sides of the sustainable use vs. protection debate. If nothing else, my experience in CITES served to dispel in me the notion that strict protection and "paper parks" – effectively denying people access to the natural resources on which they depend for their subsistence – was a universally viable solution for conserving all forms of wildlife. And yet, countless examples of unsustainable use of resources around the globe bear witness to the fact that the sustainable use paradigm has a very long way to go before it is successfully translated from theory into practice.

Alas, my career at CITES was short-lived. Caught up in the bureaucratic politics that sometimes dictate who shall remain where, I was offered a position as a programme officer in the tiny (two-person) secretariat of the Convention on Migratory Species, in Bonn, Germany. While I was disappointed to leave

my “dream job”, as well as collegial friendships that endure to this day, in retrospect the move was the best thing that could have happened to me. While many deplore the sleepiness of Bonn, I found it to be an enchanting place which, at the time, still had a thriving international diplomatic community, besides its many other attractions. Professionally, I experienced another exercise of character-building when, within nine months of my arrival in Bonn, the CMS Executive Secretary resigned and her assistant moved on, leaving the management of the secretariat in my hands for the better part of a year until a successor was appointed. What better opportunity could have arisen to prove whether or not I was up to the challenge?

I spent over a dozen years with CMS in Bonn and the years I served as Deputy Executive Secretary were undoubtedly the most fulfilling of my career. From a modest beginning of just four staff, I was given every opportunity to shape the work of the secretariat, which grew to 15 or so individuals including the staff of subsidiary CMS Agreements, by the time I left Bonn in early 2003.

I participated in seven Meetings of the Conference of the Parties (COP) between 1991 and 2008, playing a leading role in the organisation and conduct of all but the first and last of them. I also enjoyed my interactions with the CMS Scientific Council, overseeing the organisation of many of its meetings over the years and seeing it flourish with the introduction of simultaneous interpretation at my suggestion.

In some respects, the early years at CMS were the most stimulating – characterised by long hours of self-sacrifice that stretched into most evenings and weekends. I recall a CMS COP in Geneva when a nasty eye and ear infection made it difficult for me to see and hear properly, and I eventually lost my voice as well, leaving me to ask myself: “Why am I doing this?” Indeed, at such gatherings the secretariat often could only look on in dismay as delegates, acting on instructions from capitals, challenged our reasonable budget proposals, prepared in the best interest of taking forward the CMS work programme. Fortunately, many sources of professional satisfaction made up for these budgetary disappointments which came to be accepted as part of the routine.

One of the achievements of my years in Bonn that I am proud of is my role in the development of the “Memorandum of Understanding or MoU” as a flexible instrument to encourage governments to cooperate towards a common conservation objective. Though not legally-binding, these flexible agreements have proven themselves, in many instances, to be practically as effective as their more legalistic counterparts. In 1993, I oversaw the preparation of the first-ever CMS Memorandum of Understanding, for the endangered Siberian Crane, which served as the blueprint for similar instruments that followed for many other species groups, including marine turtles and dugongs, as well as various migratory birds and land mammals. (I hasten to add, however, that in the years following my departure from Bonn, this type of instrument was employed excessively and used inappropriately for some taxa that warranted stronger legal backing, in my view.)

My central role in the development of the legally-binding CMS Agreement on cetaceans of the Mediterranean and Black Sea (ACCOBAMS), fraught with diplomatic challenges, was also a source of satisfaction, as was my lesser involvement in the drafting of CMS’ largest agreement for African-Eurasian Waterbirds (AEWA). Though it has suffered from neglect in recent years, the CMS agreement I developed for marine turtles of the Atlantic coast of Africa was actually a precursor of the comparable MoU that I helped bring to fruition in the Indian Ocean (IOSEA).

My participation in the body overseeing the implementation of the six-year, multi-million dollar UNEP/GEF Siberian Crane Wetland Project in China, Iran, Kazahstan and Russia – one of the most ambitious of its day – allowed me to observe first-hand what can be achieved if sufficient resources are applied to difficult conservation issues.

My association over many years with the Wisconsin-based International Crane Foundation (ICF), and later my directorship on the Board of “Operation Migration” – an amazing project to reintroduce whooping cranes in North America – left me with fond memories of interacting with an eclectic mix of some of the most dedicated conservationists I have ever met. And, for the better part of two decades, my regular interaction with staff of the UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre in Cambridge, where some my original thesis research was done, was especially enjoyable.

Affiliations with many other inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations – the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC), International Whaling Commission (IWC), Ramsar Convention, BirdLife

International and Wetlands International, to name but a few – were also professionally enriching.

Besides satisfaction derived from helping to shape many of CMS' substantive agreements in favour of migratory species, as an administrator I also took pride in guiding CMS' early strategic planning processes and introducing the management systems that contributed to a smoothly-run secretariat during my tenure in Bonn. It has also been fulfilling to see how many of the individuals I hired over the years, particularly women, have gone on to have wonderful careers in their own right in different parts of the UN system. If by chance any of them happen to read this they will know who they are.

Though certainly not only my doing, I took satisfaction in helping to increase the membership of the Convention on Migratory Species, particularly during a period of rapid growth in the late 1990s. The membership had grown to over 80 countries when I left Bonn, from just 35 Parties when I joined the Secretariat in 1991.

I represented the Convention at countless meetings and on special occasions in countries across the world, including delivering an address alongside presidents and prime ministers on the occasion of the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in South Africa.

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My decision to leave a terrific job in Germany in 2003 was both easy and difficult. Easy, because while I was ready to take the helm of the organisation as early as 2002, when it would have been timely for the incumbent to gracefully retire, I recognised that wasn't going to happen soon and that biding my time would cause unnecessary frustration. Difficult, because I enjoyed a very comfortable working and living environment in Bonn, which anyone would have hesitated to give up. To this day, I remain grateful for my years spent in Germany and for having had the opportunity to learn the language (albeit far from fluently), which still comes in handy from time to time.

Setting up a brand new CMS office in Bangkok from scratch, posed an exciting challenge, which I was happy to take on. I was very fortunate to have been co-located with the UNEP Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, which is arguably the most dynamic hub in the whole of UNEP's regional network. While my primary role was to coordinate activities under the new Indian Ocean – Southeast Asian marine turtle agreement (IOSEA), I retained some links to my former work in the parent Convention.

In the early years I collaborated with partners in Australia and Thailand to bring to fruition the CMS Dugong MoU, modelled along the lines of IOSEA. I took pleasure in my continued involvement in the ground-breaking UNEP/GEF Siberian Crane Wetland Project, which had been inspired by the CMS Siberian Crane MoU. And I was especially pleased to have contributed for many years to the development of the East Asian - Australasian Flyway Partnership (EEAFP) which, although not a CMS Agreement, is a remarkably congenial collaboration among Governments, IGOs and NGOs.

I have to admit to being something of a "knowledge management geek", reflected also in my participation for many years in somewhat inconclusive endeavours to encourage greater information-linkages among the main biodiversity conventions. However, I take modest credit for proposing the name "inforMEA" for one such initiative that did come to fruition at one of many gatherings of experts held at UNEP/WCMC. Finally, I was happy to have successfully negotiated, on behalf of CMS, the terms of establishment of a new CMS office in Abu Dhabi, which oversees the coordination of a number of important CMS agreements and other activities.

CMS has not had an easy time over the years proving its worth alongside other biodiversity conventions with more political clout and more plentiful resources. During my tenure, the notion that CMS was primarily a European-oriented convention was effectively laid to rest, but it has still not managed to attract to its ranks many of the leading countries of the world. I have long maintained that the Convention must emphasise its strengths in areas other than producing daughter agreements – that is to say, highlighting its unique contributions to addressing problems associated with migratory animals: unsustainable exploitation, climate change, fisheries by-catch, barriers to migration, pollution of various forms on land and at sea, etc.

My objective, in moving from the global scene to a regional level, was to try to demonstrate the viability of a CMS agreement at that scale. Although I am not fully satisfied with the level of engagement we have been able to achieve, I am more content with some of the tangible accomplishments that have taken hold over the years.

My interest in information management is illustrated in many of the initiatives I introduced during my period at IOSEA, including its dynamic, information-rich website. Though it is probably not consulted as widely as I would like, I have no doubt that a younger generation more familiar with the techniques of social media can stimulate increased readership. A considerable investment was made early on in the development of a state-of-the-art online national reporting system, recognising that it is essential for countries to share information about their accomplishments and to be held accountable, to some extent, for fulfilling their commitments made under the agreement. The periodic synthesis of all of this information, though laborious for the secretariat to prepare, seeks to surmount the problem of "reporting for reporting-sake", that often exists with other international agreements. Indeed, some years ago I was heartened to receive accolades about the IOSEA reporting system from representatives of another biodiversity convention that was infinitely better resourced in all respects.

The attention given to the development of a number of innovative databases – including the Bibliography Resource, the Satellite Tracking Metadatabase, and most recently the International Flipper Tag Recovery Database – is also a legacy that IOSEA can build on. The region-wide IOSEA Year of the Turtle campaign, which the IOSEA Secretariat coordinated in 2006, helped to galvanise support for marine turtle conservation in the public at large across the Indian Ocean and South-east Asia.

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For all of the above, it would be disingenuous not to admit to having some regrets and to draw attention to some unfinished business.

The aspect of conservation that I chose to involve myself in so long ago operates at the international level, which intrinsically implies a top-down approach to coordinating action among Governments. This approach assumes that the national representatives who help to craft and eventually implement these international instruments understand the situation of the people who will be most affected by their provisions, and can genuinely reflect their concerns and interests during the negotiations. Of course, to a large extent, this is wishful thinking. In my opionion, a top-down approach will be effective only if resources are invested in figuring out what it will take to implement an agreement properly, in consultation with stakeholders; if sufficient resources are applied to that task (at all levels); and if a monitoring and feedback system is in place to assure that adjustments are made when things don't work as planned. From my experience our failure to meet many conservation objectives stems, at least partly, from a combination of shortcomings in each of these areas.

I think it is clear that bottom-up approaches to conservation, originating at the level of communities who depend directly on the resources we are seeking to conserve, must somehow be given a larger role in policy development. In this regard, I believe the contributions of smaller nongovernmental organisations that interact directly with resource users are invaluable and need to be better integrated in the work of global and regional conventions, like CMS and its daughter agreements. Needless to say, the introduction of such a novel paradigm is fraught with many challenges in terms of equitable and meaningful representation.

I also regret that, all too often, human nature dictates that we fail to make efficient use of information and tools that are readily available, choosing instead to allocate resources to collecting even more information or devising new tools to achieve the same end. This tendency is manifested in our ready disposition to draft new "action" plans or tinker incessantly with existing ones rather than devoting resources to implementing and enforcing the ones that already exist. (It is the low-hanging fruit syndrome: we do what is relatively easy and leave the heavy lifting for another day.)

Moreover, some organisations may be accused of demonstrating an indifference or passive resistance to any form of coordination, electing to do their own thing without having an eye for the "bigger picture", when a modest degree of coordination would actually be in their own self-interest. This inward-looking tendency is manifested also in the failure of some to take full advantage of the unique perspective that global or regional instruments have to offer, which is to shed light on alternative approaches or models in different countries that may be adopted or adapted for use elsewhere. As a conservationist working at the international level, I find it rewarding to assemble delegates at a meeting of counterparts and have them return home with knowledge and shared experiences that they will actually apply in their own context.

Finally, I regret that nature conservation has increasingly become a competitive business, like any other, with many of the negative attributes that entails. There are, perhaps, too many conservation organisations chasing a pie that should be big enough for all of them to enjoy without stepping on each other's toes, yet all too often these organisations compete for the same space, with unnecessary duplication of effort and inefficient utilisation of resources. Such is human nature and it is unlikely to change any time soon.

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A career is never long enough to achieve everything one sets out to do and mine is no exception. My vision to establish a Network of Sites of Importance for Marine Turtles in the IOSEA Region has yet to be fully realised. Still in its infancy, much work has yet to be done to get the network off the ground with the formal nomination of candidate sites and to brainstorm ideas on a financial mechanism that will assure its long-term viability and success. As mentioned above, much more could and should be done to convince non-governmental organisations, large and small, that the IOSEA Marine Turtle MoU is beneficial also for their important work, and not only an instrument of Governments. Lastly, the ultimate success of IOSEA – and any conservation instrument, for that matter – depends on the active engagement of its member States, both substantively and financially; and I encourage all Signatories to re-examine the commitments they made upon signing the IOSEA agreement. I am sincerely grateful to all of the Governments that have supported IOSEA over the years, through their representatives' intellectual inputs, their voluntary contributions of funding, and their steadfast implementation of conservation activities at the national level.

At the end of the day, interaction with other people is what makes any human endeavour fulfilling. Coming from a science background, I have especially appreciated my association with some of the world's leading

scientists in their fields, whether they be concerned with marine turtles, cetaceans or migratory birds. This includes many of the elite members of the IOSEA Advisory Committee who have generously offered their time and knowledge in support of the cause of marine turtle conservation. I also salute the countless conservationists working at the grassroots level, trying to make a difference every day through their remarkable dedication and perseverance.

I will always be grateful to my mentors in university and to those who helped me make a start in my career. As I get closer to winding down my own activities as the longest-serving staff member of the UNEP/CMS Secretariat, it is perhaps fitting that I now have an opportunity to repay this debt of gratitude by mentoring a bright young woman, presently working with me, who reminds me of myself when I was just embarking on my journey some 25 years ago.

It's heartening to know that our collective future rests in the hands of a new generation that has at its disposal an enormous capacity of knowledge and technical innovation to tackle the unresolved problems that their predecessors pass on to them.

As for marine turtles, the exciting news that we have been hearing from many parts of the globe in recent months – with many turtle populations rebounding or at least stabilising – is an indication that thanks to the interventions human beings have made over the past four or five decades, we are at last helping to effect positive change for these remarkable creatures.

Their existence on this planet for tens of millions of years is sufficient proof that they have a remarkable ability to adapt to changing environmental conditions and will continue to do so – as long as we give them a fighting chance.

Douglas Hykle
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