

Partnering to Conserve Native Species

The Claret cup cactus is one of many cacti in CITES Appendix II.

From paddlefish and peregrine falcons to Atlantic bottlenose dolphins and orchids, CITES protects more than 700 animals and almost 500 plants native to the United States and its territories.

These CITES-protected species may be highly localized—like the Venus’ flytrap, native only to North and South Carolina—or cross borders into other countries, such as the 450 native CITES-listed species the United States shares with Mexico. Ensuring their conservation and sustainable use in international trade requires collaboration with a vast network of species experts and resource managers across the country and around the world.

Recovery for the alligator meant monitoring, protection, reintroduction, ranching and captive breeding. In 1979, the American alligator was transferred to CITES Appendix II, allowing the resumption of commercial international trade under a special rule; by 1987, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service declared this reptile as fully recovered under the ESA.

Today, the federal government, state wildlife agencies, and the leather industry have worked together to develop a management program that includes a sustainable harvest, supporting industry while also conserving the American alligator. U.S. range states continue to protect American alligators against overharvest for international trade.

Alligators are still listed as threatened under the ESA, but only because of their similar appearance to the American crocodile, which is listed as endangered except in Florida, where it is listed as threatened.

A Team Effort Protects Iconic Native Species

The recovery of the American alligator, native to 11 southeastern States, highlights a story of true teamwork. Since the 1800s, this swamp dweller had been hunted, largely unregulated, for its skin to make high-quality leather products. By the 1950s, hunting and habitat loss had led to serious population declines, and some states ended hunting in the early 1960s. Listed as endangered in 1967 under legislation preceding the U.S. Endangered Species Act, and in CITES Appendix I in 1975, the American alligator received protection to aid its recovery. The CITES listing prohibited commercial international trade.





In 2011, the United States exported more than 400,000 U.S. alligator specimens, including skins, jewelry, leather products and scientific specimens. The recovery of the American alligator, together with the transformation of U.S. industry practices, demonstrates that conservation and sustainable use can go hand-in-hand.

“The recovery of the American alligator and the continued sustainability of the industry demonstrate the power of collaboration between the USFWS, the states and commercial interests through CITES,” said Curtis Taylor of the West Virginia Department of Natural Resources, adding that it “is a model of how conservation should work.”

Partnerships Benefit Native Plants

Nearly all of the world’s approximately 1,500 species of cacti occur in the Americas, from extreme southern South America to some parts of Canada. Cacti vary in shape and size, and for hundreds of years, they have been sought by collectors around the world. With the exception of three genera, all species of cacti are included in the CITES Appendices, with the overwhelming majority in Appendix II, which regulates international trade.

The southwestern United States shares much of its desert ecosystem, and the plant diversity therein, with Mexico. But even if you can easily buy a cactus in Mexico, you will need permits from the Mexican authorities, including CITES permits, to bring the plant into the United States. These permits ensure that the cacti were legally acquired and that the trade is not detrimental to the survival of these species.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (USDA-APHIS) has inspection personnel at ports of entry along the nearly 2,000-mile U.S.-Mexico border, including three CITES-designated ports of Nogales, Arizona; San Diego, California; and Brownsville, Texas.

When these inspection personnel discover a cactus in a car at a border crossing, and the person does not possess the required CITES permits, the authorities seize the plant because this trade may jeopardize the species’ survival in Mexico. The question then becomes what to do with these seized specimens, which may weigh more than 100 pounds and be decades old. This is when the Service’s partnership with U.S. zoos, botanic gardens and research institutions, through the U.S. Plant Rescue Center Program (PRC Program), comes into play.

The recovery of the American alligator is a CITES success story.

The 83 institutions that participate on a voluntary basis in the PRC Program provide permanent homes for live CITES-listed plants that have been seized at U.S. ports of entry and exit and include them in their collections. Many of these institutions use these rare and unusual plants to educate the public on CITES and the conservation of threatened plants and their ecosystems. They may also propagate the plants and share their progeny with other institutions or private growers, thus making them available for further propagation and research and, potentially for rare species, reintroduction into the wild.

While many of these specimens will never be returned to their wild habitats, the partnership with PRC institutions provides an opportunity to make the public aware of the rules regarding wildlife trade and to show the impact this trade can have on wild populations.

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