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## **Eight SAARC nations join to fight illegal wildlife trade**

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Kathmandu, Feb 17 (IANS) Eight SAARC countries have agreed to work jointly to tackle the region's illegal wildlife trade that has assumed alarming proportions. The countries have come under the banner of the South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme (SACEP), an inter-governmental organisation, to tackle the illegal trade.

The South Asian region is a storehouse of biological diversity and rich terrestrial, freshwater and marine resources. As a result, illegal trade and overexploitation of wild animals and plants pose a major challenge to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in the region.

In a first regional workshop held in Kathmandu, the group agreed to a series of joint action as part of a South Asia Wildlife Trade Initiative (SAWTI). This includes setting up of a South Asia Experts Group on Wildlife Trade and

development of a South Asia Regional Strategic Plan on Wildlife Trade (2008-2013).

The SACEP was established in 1982 for promoting regional co-operation in South Asia in the field of environment. The group includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

The workshop was organised by the Nepal Ministry of Environment, Science and Technology, SACEP, World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) Nepal and TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade-monitoring network. Senior wildlife officials from these countries have called upon the international community to support action in South Asia by providing financial and technical assistance in the implementation of the regional plan, an official statement of TRAFFIC said here.

The Kathmandu workshop has agreed to focus on a number of key areas of work. These include co-operation and co-ordination, effective legislation policies and law enforcement, sharing knowledge and effective dissemination of information, sustainability of legal trade and livelihoods security, intelligence networks and early warning systems and capacity building.

Nepal's Minister for Environment, Science and Technology Farmullah Mansoor said his government is committed towards combating the illegal wildlife trade in the region. Nepal currently holds the chair position of SACEP's South Asia Governing Council.

SACEP Director-General Arvind A. Boaz said: "The agreement reached on SAWTI puts in place the foundations for a co-operative effort to crack down on illegal trade and to improve the management of wild species that can be legally traded under national laws in the region."

"SAWTI is the first wildlife trade initiative of its kind in South Asia and SACEP is confident it will lead to further commitment in the region, and closer engagement among neighbours to effectively address wildlife trade problems," Boaz added.

WWF Nepal's Country Director, Anil Manandhar said the greatest challenge was combating the highly organised illegal trade networks between poachers, domestic and international traders of wildlife products, combined with highly porous borders between some countries.

"No single nation can control such illegal activities alone," he said.

The decisions of this workshop will be presented for

endorsement at ministerial level at the Eleventh Meeting of the Governing Council of SACEP, which will take place in New Delhi later this year.

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