

## **CITES contributions to the 2022 HLPF**

- (a) Progress, experience, lessons learned, challenges and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of SDGs 4, 5, 14, 15 and 17 from the vantage point of your intergovernmental body, bearing in mind the three dimensions of sustainable development and the interlinkages across the SDGs and targets, including policy implications of their synergies and trade-offs;

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora (CITES) is a legally binding multilateral treaty with 184 Parties. The Convention's aim is to ensure that international trade in wild animals and plants specimens does not threaten the survival of these species in the wild. The way the convention works is by regulating international trade in wildlife through a licensing system so that it is legal, sustainable and traceable. CITES work is mostly focused on the implementation of SDGs 14 and 15.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on the Convention's mission primarily on its governance as the governing and scientific bodies were not able to meet as planned to oversee the implementation of the Convention during the intersessional period between meetings of the Conference of the Parties, the highest governing body of the Convention. The last meeting of the Conference of the Parties took place in 2019. Furthermore, the original host of the next Conference of the Parties in March 2022 (Costa Rica) had to withdraw its offer to host the meeting because of the economic and social impacts of the pandemic on its national budget. This caused an urgent search for a new host and, fortunately, Panama has offered to host the meeting in November 2022, which will allow the Parties to reduce the risks to the conservation of wildlife through their decisions with only a few months delay.

Equally important was the impact on national implementation of the Convention. Governments had to put in place measures to halt the spread of the COVID-19 virus in the last two years, and these have had significant negative economic and environmental national and global impacts on wildlife conservation. In relation to CITES implementation, these measures have led to restrictions on the ability of employees to attend their place of work and carry out necessary scientific and capacity-building work in the field; restrictions on the numbers of people gathering together at meetings; and international travel restrictions, caused by lack of transportation possibilities, quarantine obligations or border controls.

Many national CITES authorities have been in contact with the Secretariat during the pandemic and report having adapted their daily work to the new circumstances. Some difficulties have been encountered including inability to travel to CITES meetings due to a lack of flights, border closures

or restrictions and employment rules for government workers. Parties have also reported difficulties caused by teleworking including in the issuance of permits and certificates, replying to Secretariat requests for information and coordination between different government departments. These difficulties are caused by insufficient hardware and software tools and a lack of possibilities for permit and certificate issuance and management to be undertaken in a teleworking environment. Parties, however, appear to continue working on the implementation of the Convention in spite of the challenges, wherever and however they can. In the area of training and capacity-building for example, the Secretariat has seen an increase in the subscription to online courses, as well as a more frequent request for virtual national or regional workshops.

Led by their Chairs, all three committees have pursued their intersessional work through working groups, email and informal online discussions. Parties have been kept informed of developments through Notifications to the Parties No. 2020/056, 2020/057, 2020/059, 2020/067, 2021/004, 2021/009, 2021/013 and 2021/015. The Standing Committee has started or concluded intersessional decision-making procedures on four recommendations, using Rule 20 of their Rules of Procedure. The Animals Committee and the Plants Committee have similarly taken 12 decisions using Rule 19 of their own Rules of Procedure. However, these decision-making processes are lengthy, taking a very minimum of 70 days for the SC and 65 days for the AC and PC. In order to progress their work, the committees have established intersessional working groups: the Standing Committee has established 17 working groups and the Animals and Plants Committees six each. If the intersessional working groups are able to conclude their tasks and the committees are able to review and decide on the issues concerned during 2021, then the Secretariat believes that a significant amount of the work assigned to the committees by CoP18 can still be accomplished. Nevertheless, some intersessional activities of the committees may not be completed, in particular those which required the review of the outcome of a workshop or other meeting.

(Please see the attached survey results on the experiences of CITES Parties in the implementation of the Convention during the COVID-19 pandemic if more information is required.)

- (b) Assessment of the situation regarding the principle of “leaving no one behind” against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic and for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, within the respective areas addressed by your intergovernmental body;

It is clear that many developing and least developed countries are at a disadvantage due to their lack of access to the internet. The lack of access by many countries to a stable internet and the digital divide have been major themes during the sanitary crisis. The interest in fairness in global environmental decision-making has been brought up as an important issue for both developed and developing countries in intergovernmental processes.

At the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, many members of all three committees and several observers have expressed reservations about conducting meetings and in particular taking decisions in online meetings. Although technological developments in most States are advancing rapidly, ensuring fair and equitable access to online meetings has been identified by SC, AC and PC members as a concern. CITES authorities have also been concerned about the engagement of Permanent missions in Geneva in detailed technical discussions related to CITES, should any meetings be planned in hybrid form in Geneva.

Ensuring transparency and a fair and equitable access to meetings for Parties and observers was stressed by a number of Parties and observers. Aside from fair and equitable access, the timing of online meetings with global participation is challenging. Realistically, such meetings can only last 2-3 hours and even then, participants in some regions would be required to join at very early or late hours. Any online meetings may therefore need to be spread over several consecutive days and agendas would need to be restructured accordingly. Regional meetings of Parties in similar time zones discussing the same agenda of issues could also be a way of addressing this issue.

Parties have also reported difficulties caused by teleworking including in the issuance of CITES permits and certificates and replying to Secretariat requests for information and coordination between different government departments. These difficulties are caused by insufficient hardware and software tools and a lack of possibilities for permit and certificate issuance and management to be undertaken in a teleworking environment. The digital divide also has an impact on the processing of permits as many developing countries have not been able to install electronic systems for the production of CITES permits (e-permits). If they would have had the access to an electronic system, permitting would probably have still been able to continue during the crisis.

Parties, however, appear to continue working on the implementation of the Convention in spite of the challenges, wherever and however they can. In the area of training and capacity-building for example, the Secretariat has seen an increase in the subscription to online courses, as well as a more frequent request for virtual national or regional workshops.

(c) Actions and policy recommendations in areas requiring urgent attention in relation to the implementation of the SDGs under review;

With the adoption of a new Strategic Vision until 2030, the Conference of the Parties has tasked the Secretariat to undertake a comparative analysis in order to illustrate the linkages between the adopted CITES Strategic Vision 2021-2030 and the goals within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and, once adopted, the post-2020 biodiversity framework; and to review the objectives of CITES Strategic Vision 2021-2030 against the current CITES Resolutions and Decisions. The Standing Committee, in collaboration with the Animals and Plants Committees, will make recommendations on new or revised indicators of progress to be included in the *CITES Strategic Vision: 2021-2030*, for consideration by the 19th meeting of the Conference of the Parties in 2022.

Highly biodiverse Parties with wildlife-based tourism have reported being affected by the pandemic with loss of tourists visiting their national parks, for example, which brought in much needed foreign currency for the conservation of wildlife species and support to anti-poaching activities. More needs to be done to invest in wildlife conservation that is not dependent on tourism. Research is needed to provide scientific evidence whether poaching increased during the pandemic either as a food source or because rangers were unable to carry out their normal activities during lockdowns.

- (d) Policy recommendations, commitments and cooperation measures for promoting a sustainable, resilient and inclusive recovery from the pandemic while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda;

The CITES Secretariat plans to make recommendations to the 19<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Conference of the Parties in 2022 based on the inputs of the Parties and observers to the original paper circulated on impacts of COVID-19 on the implementation of the Convention. The recommendations will probably focus on the following issues:

- a) best course of action if intersessional work and meetings are affected by exceptional circumstances [referred to as “emerging operational issues” in paragraph 2 g) of Annex 1 to Resolution Conf. 18.2];
- b) review of the meeting schedules and intersessional decision-making procedures of the committees to allow better planning and to permit procedural and simple substantive decisions to be taken more quickly without reducing the ability of all stakeholders to offer comments and suggestions;

- c) adjustments to the Rules of procedure of the committees established by the CoP to permit and facilitate online and hybrid meetings and decision-making where these are required and agreed;
- d) review of the allocation of funds in the Trust Fund to make provision for tools for online and hybrid meetings if required and allow greater financial flexibility and contingency measures to cater for unplanned situations;
- e) review of the scope for increasing the use of digital means of CITES implementation where this is appropriate; and
- f) reflection on the need for insurance to cover the cost of cancelling meetings at short notice.

(e) Key messages for inclusion into the Ministerial Declaration of the 2022 HLPF.

\* Improved access to vaccines will help with return to a transparent and participatory global environmental governance. National implementation of the Convention to avoid sickness and spread of the virus will also be helped with improved access to vaccines.

\* Populations who are living in close proximity to wild animals and plants, and governments who must invest in the maintenance of habitats and well-being of wildlife, should be supported with stable and consistent investments in wildlife conservation so loss of tourism income does not negatively affect sustainability.

\* The digital divide is hindering fair and transparent environmental governance amongst many other issues and should be key for the achievement of the SDGs. While face-to-face meetings are seen as necessary for negotiations to be carried out in a fair and transparent manner, the CITES Secretariat has noted an increase in participation by many Parties and stakeholders for online meetings related to capacity-building and information-sharing. With better access to stable internet, the Secretariat could reach far more stakeholders than it has in the past and ideally increase wildlife conservation actions.

\* A UN policy on preparedness for these types of events would be helpful so we can have continuity of business and fair and equal participation of developing countries in times of crisis, such as ensuring that when travel to meetings is not possible we can offer support to the least developed countries to have access to internet.