CONVENTION ON INTERNATIONAL TRADE IN ENDANGERED SPECIES
OF WILD FAUNA AND FLORA

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Twentieth meeting of the Animals Committee
Johannesburg (South Africa), 29 March-2 April 2004

International Workshop on CITES Implementation for Seahorse Conservation and Trade
Mazatlan (Mexico), 3-5 February 2004

SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. This document was prepared by the United States and Mexico.

2. The International Workshop on CITES Implementation for Seahorse Conservation and Trade brought together over 40 participants from 9 countries, with representatives from CITES Parties, the CITES Secretariat, fisheries agencies, non-governmental organizations, industry, academia and public aquariums. The goal of the workshop was to assist countries in identifying sustainable management options for seahorse fisheries and addressing the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) permitting requirements for trade under the new CITES Appendix II listing of all seahorse species that goes into effect in May 15, 2004. The workshop was organized by Mexico and the United States, with logistical support provided by the International Fund for Animal Welfare.

3. The workshop opened with welcoming speeches from the director of the Secretaria de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Participants were asked to consider and assess practical means to (i) enhance collection and sharing of fisheries and population data; (ii) identify short and long-term approaches to sustainably manage fisheries and bycatch; (iii) evaluate detrimental and non-detrimental trade for wild-harvested and aquacultured seahorses; and (iv) develop pragmatic ways to inspect and validate shipments of live and dried seahorses. Experts then gave presentations on the biology, taxonomy and distribution of seahorses; seahorse fisheries and bycatch; international trade; CITES requirements for Appendix-II trade; approaches to determine if and ensure that trade is non-detrimental; and identification tools to assist law enforcement in monitoring seahorse shipments. This was followed by national reports on seahorse fisheries and trade in 10 countries.

4. Three concurrent working groups met for one and a half days to discuss the following topics: 1) elements of a functional national seahorse management program; 2) enforcement and implementation of a CITES listing; and 3) non-detriment findings. Recommendations were presented on the third day, which were refined with input from all participants.

5. Working group 1 and 3 recommended interim short-term **voluntary** measures to ensure non-detrimental trade for wild harvest that included a universal minimum standard length **for export** (i.e., 10 cm), with application of limits on the total volume of trade to current levels, and a cap on new licenses **whenever** there is clear evidence that seahorse populations are being overexploited and/or are diminishing. Other needs include efforts to map, characterize and assess seahorse habitats, and

implementation of fishery dependent and fishery independent monitoring programs. An assessment of the percentage of existing protected seahorse habitat, and identification of additional protected areas based on seahorse life history and ontogeny, was thought to be a primary tool that could be used to make a non-detriment finding for non-selective (seahorse bycatch) fisheries. Other management options were assessed, with suggestions to test and evaluate different measures through an adaptive management process depending on the characteristics of each fishery.

6. Working group 2 suggested that certification or registration of captive breeding facilities, along with experimentation in methodology to tag captive bred seahorses is necessary to improve the capability of law enforcement at differentiating wild from aquacultured species. Until marking methods are developed, WG2 agreed that a paper document would suffice to distinguish wild and aquacultured seahorses. They concluded that the only practical way to monitor large shipments of dried seahorses is to report in weight, with conversion factors provided to assess numbers, with a recommendation that exporting countries require that traders separate shipments by species for permits to be valid. Separating seahorses from other tropical fish shipments would also assist law enforcement. Additional taxonomic work is needed to resolve the identification of similar species and to develop tools to assist in identification of live specimens.

7. Working group 3 also identified general criteria for acceptable and "non-detrimental" aquaculture operations, with emphasis on rearing capacity, prevention of release of aquaculture product into the wild, reliance on wild broodstock, and controls to minimize disease and mortality. The working group noted that CITES requires non-detriment findings for aquaculture operations producing F1 specimens from wild-origin broodstock, but agreed that there is no need for a standard minimum size to control exports of cultured seahorses at this time.

8. During the final session, workshop participants discussed and formulated 8 key recommendations to manage wild harvest and captive breeding operations, ensure non-detrimental trade, and facilitate implementation of the CITES Appendix II listing:

Recommendation 1: Minimum export size is a voluntary interim measure that could be used for making non-detriment findings. Complementary auxiliary and voluntary measures include a quota on the export levels at or below current levels, and a cap on the issuance of new licenses.

Recommendation 2: Countries with export fisheries should strive to obtain and make available certain minimum data sets to assist in validating adaptive management measures and making non-detriment findings. This includes improved documentation of catch and effort data along with basic information on population status and trends obtained via fishery-independent programs, or by subsampling commercial landings.

Recommendation 3: Countries should evaluate the extent of seahorse habitat that is currently closed to non-selective harvest and identify new areas as appropriate to protect vulnerable life stages. Comparing the extent of protected versus non-protected habitat will also enable CITES Scientific Authorities to gauge relative amount of seahorse refugia and the potential impact of exporting a given amount of seahorses taken as bycatch.

Recommendation 4: The long-term sustainability of seahorse fisheries and trade requires a systematic process to develop, implement and adapt management measures to meet resource and community needs. Countries should initiate efforts to improve communication, participation and cooperation among industry, resource management agencies, local communities, scientists and other stakeholders. Specific "sentinel" or indicator fisheries could be targeted to test and evaluate various management measures through an adaptive management process. Enforcement of existing laws (e.g., trawling bans in specific areas) is needed to improve the conservation of seahorses.

Recommendation 5: Exporting countries should adopt standards for seahorse exports, including uniform reporting volumes, separation of shipments of seahorses and other tropical fishes, and transparent packaging materials for live animals. Attempts should be made to resolve taxonomic discrepancies and develop tools and training materials for live seahorses.

Recommendation 6: Seahorse aquaculture operations should be inventoried and assessed to determine their production capabilities, degree of reliance on wild populations, and environmental concerns. Operations should be encouraged to develop marking systems to distinguish aquacultured seahorses from wild-caught specimens. Until marking systems are refined for aquacultured seahorses, national CITES authorities should rely on thorough paper documentation to distinguish between wild and aquacultured specimens. There is no need to impose a standard minimum export size for aquacultured seahorses produced in non-detrimental facilities.

Recommendation 7: Support is needed for publication of an updated Project Seahorse trade report, along with detailed individual country reports, as these documents could provide the baseline data needed by individual countries to identify fisheries of concern, determine the appropriate initial management options for their particular situation, and identify gaps in information and management needs.

Recommendation 8: Communication about seahorse management and the results of the present workshop should be addressed in a number of ways, including: 1) a CITES Notification to the Parties regarding the workshop proceedings; 2) communication about national seahorse management measures to the CITES Secretariat for dissemination and reference; 3) communication with the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), other UN Environmental Programme offices, regional fisheries management organizations (RMFO's) asking for capacity building and information sharing on seahorses and other bycatch management issues; 4) domestic coordination between non-governmental organizations (NGO's), museums, academia and CITES Authorities to gather relevant data on seahorse conservation status in national waters.