

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



Thirty-second meeting of the Animals Committee
Geneva (Switzerland), 19 – 23 June 2023

Regional matters

Regional reports

OCEANIA

1. This document has been submitted by the regional representative for Oceania (Dr Hugh Robertson, New Zealand).*

General Information

2. Number of Parties in the region: nine (Australia, Fiji, New Zealand, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu).

Although they do not show up on the CITES world map, the Oceania region still has a large number (8) and hence proportion (c.50%) of states that are not members of CITES: Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Tokelau, and Tuvalu. The Cook Islands and Niue self-govern in free association with New Zealand, and Tokelau is a self-administering dependency of New Zealand. While New Zealand has some role in the foreign affairs for these countries this does not render them a party to CITES under New Zealand law. In contrast, the French overseas territories of French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and Wallis and Futuna, and the Australian, United States and United Kingdom territories in the region (e.g. Norfolk Island, American Samoa, Pitcairn Island) do come under the CITES umbrella through membership of their parent states.

The Secretariat for the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) has been active in supporting smaller Oceania Parties to fulfil their CITES obligations, and their assistance is very welcome. SPREP have provided assistance to one state, which may be interested in joining the CITES family, to undertake a review of their CITES management practices and determine the advantages and disadvantages of joining CITES.

Communication with Parties in the region since AC 31 (online June-July 2021)

3. Following AC31, I sent a report to member Parties in the region outlining the key outcomes affecting Oceania.

In the lead-up to CoP19 (Panama, November 2022), SPREP hosted eight of the nine CITES Parties, the CITES Secretariat, and regional or international experts on topics of relevance to the region on the CoP19 agenda. This meeting also doubled as an opportunity to train CITES staff on some of their key responsibilities under the Convention. I gave presentations at the meeting on the role of the Animals Committee, Non-detriment Findings, the Review of Significant Trade process and I introduced the Sharks paper (CoP 19, Doc 65).

* *The geographical designations employed in this document do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the CITES Secretariat (or the United Nations Environment Programme) concerning the legal status of any country, territory, or area, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. The responsibility for the contents of the document rests exclusively with its author.*

At CoP19 in Panama, the Oceania region held daily meetings, supported by Haruko Okusu, Sophie Flensburg and Hyeon Jeong Kim of the CITES Secretariat. Through these meetings, we were able to discuss and seek funding and other support (such as delaying implementation) to address potential challenges in implementing shark and sea cucumber listings. The preparation of NDFs continues to be a major concern for Parties given the paucity of relevant national or regional data.

SPREP has organised a range of CITES activities under their Pacific European Union Marine Partnership Programme (PEUMP) funded by the EU and the Government of Sweden. Of particular note are the activities within the "Bycatch and Integrated Ecosystem Management" programme which focuses on reducing the bycatch of threatened, endangered and protected marine species in oceanic and coastal fisheries; promoting the conservation of marine species and supporting Pacific countries to achieve their CITES obligations or provide equivalent documentation. I have participated in many regional Teams/Zoom meetings on marine turtles, sharks and rays, and sea cucumbers. I have also provided advice on the development of an NDF for giant clam stockpiles in the Solomon Islands, and on the responsibilities that Parties have when vessels fishing in their waters and on the high seas do so under their flag.

Relevant CITES implementation issues in the region.

4. Oceania covers a vast area of mostly tropical regions dominated by the marine environment. Trade risks to wild fauna and flora must be seen in the context of a range of environmental threats, including invasive species, global climate change, habitat loss, and domestic over-exploitation. Coral bleaching has had a dramatic effect on the reefs in some parts of the region (e.g. in Australia and Fiji) and there are concerns about the rapid depletion of stocks of marine species such as sharks and rays, and many species of sea cucumber. Marine resources form a key part of the local culture and the local economy, therefore trade issues concerning them are of critical and growing interest to the countries of the region. The relationship between trade and other pressures needs to be kept in mind but CITES has an important role in ensuring the sustainable use and protection of species in the marine environment of the region.
5. For many countries in Oceania, a large part of the population is dependent on marine resources for their livelihoods, either through artisanal fisheries or through ecotourism. In some countries, international tourism made up >50% of the total GDP. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was particularly severe to the economies and people in the Oceania region even though strong border restrictions resulted in relatively few deaths in most countries. The lack of tourist dollars in the island economies resulted in increased pressure on natural resources for food, especially in the marine environment. Disappointingly, one huge marine sanctuary, partly created to boost ecotourism, has been opened up to commercial fishing. International tourism has resumed throughout the region, but it may take a long time to return to pre-Covid levels because of the newly perceived risks associated with the industry, because many people enjoyed a return to life without being out-numbered by foreign tourists, and many hospitality staff left their country for employment elsewhere or re-trained into other careers. The consequent loss of national and personal incomes from tourism will undoubtedly lead to greater pressures on natural resources for both sustenance and for international trade.
6. There has been considerable interest in the region in the implementation of the listing of commercially important shark and sea cucumbers, especially the challenges of providing NDFs for migratory sharks or shared stocks, where little data exists because historically shark catches and exports have generally not been recorded to species level. Many Oceania parties plan to use a generic regional template to do their NDFs for sharks and sea cucumbers with some fields already pre-populated with biological and regional information, with country-specific data to be entered into remaining fields. SPREP and its consultants, and the Secretariat for the Pacific Community (SPC) have been particularly active in supporting the development of NDFs for marine species. Planned regional workshops were abandoned because of Covid, and instead SPREP, SPC TierraMar, and TRAFFIC have run virtual one-on-one training with Fiji, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu, and then have provided technical assistance to analyse data and review draft NDFs.
7. Because the region has a very small human population in relation to area administered, and small sizes of government departments, capacity remains a critical issue for the Parties and non-Parties in Oceania. CITES is normally but a small part of the wide range of environmental and conservation responsibilities of a small number of government officials. Often just one or two people deal with all of the Multilateral Environmental Agreements, and staff turnover rates are often high in the small public services of island nations and in the model implemented by federal government departments in Australia. Some Parties have very low levels of trade in CITES-listed species and so attending to CITES requests for information is a low priority, and electronic communications to registered MAs and SAs is sometimes technically difficult, if not impossible.

The recent listing of further commercially important marine species has raised the profile of CITES within many parties and regional organisations in the Oceania region, and this has led to improved cooperation between environmental, fisheries and police/customs agencies within countries and across the region. I especially want to acknowledge the increasing role that SPREP has played as a coordinating body for CITES issues in the region. Their environmental network through the Pacific is very well established and their staff have assisted greatly with the implementation of CITES regionally.

8. The New Zealand government has provided financial and other support to assist a number of Oceania Parties to develop suitable domestic legislation to support CITES. The CITES Secretariat has provided assistance in developing and/or reviewing draft legislation. Samoa has submitted new legislation for enactment, and Tonga has prepared draft legislation. A contract has been let for the development of legislation in Palau. In New Zealand, the 1989 act supporting CITES has been updated and the draft legislation is on the agenda for enactment.

The development of rigorous NDFs (or equivalent documentations for those countries outside of CITES) remains a major stumbling block in the region, where resource data are often sparse, and this needs to be a focus for future training assistance to the region. The region appears keen to implement electronic permitting to overcome some of the permitting and reporting load borne by a few CITES staff. Papua New Guinea and Australia are leading the way in the region.

Capacity-building activities and awareness campaigns

9. Capacity-building activities were largely put on hold during the Covid pandemic, except by way of email traffic, webinars and virtual workshops. A couple of valuable workshops organised by the CITES Secretariat and by the German government resulted in better engagement between CITES (often Environment) staff and Marine Resources staff. The latter had often had little exposure to CITES and so these workshops were very useful opportunities to build national capacity to deal with CITES implementation issues.

When international travel in the region resumed in 2022, the opportunity was taken to include some capacity-building at the regional pre-CoP meeting in Samoa (see Paragraph 3).

10. Doing NDFs for marine species remains a major stumbling block for many Parties in Oceania. My advice has been that in situations where there is a lack of robust data, but where traditional/ indigenous knowledge from coastal community leaders indicates that the species involved is not known to be of immediate conservation concern, rather than simply banning the export of the species until such time as the data are available, it is best to do an initial NDF that is conservative but has conditions requiring fishers/traders to gather and share more information that will help to refine the NDFs in future. The aim is to get to a point where the trade is sustainable so that coastal communities can derive a consistent source of income from them rather than go through boom periods followed by periods with no trade whatsoever as stocks recover – this is neither good for the species nor the artisanal fishers.
11. As the largest Parties in the region, both Australia and New Zealand are still looking for effective ways to support requests for assistance from our Pacific colleagues. We appreciate the increasing input from colleagues in the SPREP who were particularly active in supporting delegates from small island nations in the lead-up to and at CoP19. I would also like to express sincere thanks to staff of the CITES Secretariat for all of the assistance they have provided to the workshop organisers during the past 13 years that I have been Oceania representative on the AC, because their in-person input and expertise has been invaluable in this distant and far-flung region.
12. On a personal note, with the advent of Teams/Zoom meetings as a common mechanism to share knowledge and hold discussions, the Parties in Oceania always seem to be at a disadvantage because the CITES Secretariat and the majority of participants are in time zones opposite those of our region. Oceania participants seemingly always meet in the middle of the night, and the distance and cost of attending in-person meetings of the scientific committees and workshops also results in poor levels of participation from the region. The appearance of CITES Secretariat staff in our region has increased in recent times, and they are always warmly welcomed.

Agenda items of particular interest in the Oceania region

13. The following items are of particular interest to the nine Parties of Oceania:

- 14.2: Review of significant trade (in corals)
- 19: Identification materials
- 34: Songbird Trade
- 37: Sharks & Rays