

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



33rd meeting of the Animals Committee  
Geneva (Switzerland), 12 - 13 July 2024

Species conservation and trade

Fauna

Aquatic species

Seahorses (*Hippocampus* spp.)

REPORT OF THE INTERSESSIONAL WORKING GROUP

1. This document has been prepared by the chair of the intersessional working group on *seahorses* (*Hippocampus* spp.)<sup>\*</sup>.
2. At its 19th meeting (CoP19; Panama City, 2022), the Conference of the Parties adopted [Decisions 19.228 to 19.232](#) on *Seahorses* (*Hippocampus* spp.), including Decisions 19.228, 19.229 and 19.231, which read as follows:

***Directed to the Secretariat***

**19.228** *The Secretariat shall:*

- a) *subject to external funding, collaborate with Parties and species experts to prepare a report on the global illegal trade in seahorses, for consideration by the Standing Committee. The report should include an analysis of extracted data from the CITES illegal trade database, consultations with regional enforcement networks as applicable, analysis of illegal trade routes, modus operandi and seizures, and information contained in the studies prepared in response to Decision 18.229 paragraph c) i); and*
- b) *report on implementation of paragraph a) of the present Decision to the Standing Committee at its 77th and 78th meeting.*

***Directed to source, transit, and consumer Parties for which there is evidence of illegal and/or unsustainable international trade in dried seahorses***

**19.229** *To effectively implement the inclusion of seahorses in Appendix II of CITES, source, transit, and consumer Parties for which there is evidence of illegal and/or unsustainable international trade in dried seahorses are encouraged to:*

- a) *collaborate with key stakeholders and species experts to develop national or regional plans of action to improve CITES implementation for seahorses and should include the following, inter alia:*

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<sup>\*</sup> *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*

- i) *encouraging collaboration and communication between key stakeholders at a national and regional level, including Environment, Fisheries and Enforcement agencies, with respect to CITES implementation and data gathering for the international trade in seahorses;*
  - ii) *improving monitoring, detection and law enforcement activities related to seahorses in coastal areas and at transaction points (e.g. in the marketplace, online, in maritime areas, and at air- and seaports);*
  - iii) *submitting comprehensive and accurate information on illegal international trade in seahorses in their annual illegal trade reports to the Secretariat, as required in compliance with Resolution Conf. 11.17 (Rev. CoP19) on National reports, and in support of Decision 19.228, paragraph a);*
  - iv) *addressing the main drivers of illegal and unsustainable trade by effectively regulating and constraining the operations of non-selective fishing gears, such as bottom trawls and gillnets, to reduce their impacts on seahorses, and combating illegal, unregulated and unreported (IUU) fishing of seahorses by developing best practices for sustainable harvest; and*
- b) *share progress in developing and implementing these national or regional plans of action with the Secretariat for its report to the 33rd meeting of the Animals Committee.*

**Directed to the Animals Committee**

**19.231** *The Animals Committee shall:*

- a) *in consultation with species experts, analyse and review the results of any activities under Decisions 19.228 and 19.229, the report produced under Decision 18.229, paragraph c) i), and other relevant available information;*
  - b) *develop recommendations to the Parties, the Secretariat, and relevant stakeholders, as appropriate, to ensure sustainable and legal international trade in seahorses;*
  - c) *consider recommending seahorses as a case study to the 2nd international expert workshop on non-detriment findings; and*
  - d) *report on the implementation of the present Decision to the Standing Committee, as appropriate.*
3. At the 32nd meeting of the Animals Committee (AC32; Geneva, June 2023), the Committee considered documents [AC32 Doc. 38.1 \(Rev. 1\)](#) and [AC32 Doc. 38.2](#), which were submitted by the Secretariat and the United States of America respectively. Document AC32 Doc. 38.1 (Rev. 1) provided an update on the implementation of the Decisions on seahorse. Annex 1 of that document contained recommendations from the summary report “Changes in the international trade in live seahorses (*Hippocampus* spp.) after their listing on CITES Appendix II” and Annex 2 had recommendations from the report “Implementation of CITES Appendix II listing for seahorses in the context of export bans and suspensions”. Document AC32 Doc. 38.2 presented the outcomes of the Asia region workshop on implementing CITES for seahorses held from 14 to 17 March 2023 in Cebu, Philippines, hosted by Project Seahorse, the Seahorse, Pipefish and Seadragon Specialist Group of the Species Survival Commission of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and the Zoological Society of London-Philippines and co-hosted by the Philippines.
4. The Animals Committee established an intersessional working group with a mandate to (see summary record [AC32 SR](#)):
- a) review available information on trade in seahorses; including the recommendations contained in Annexes 1 and 2 to document AC32 Doc. 38.1 (Rev.1), taking into consideration the issues raised in paragraphs 8 and 9 of that document; and the recommendations of the expert workshop contained in document AC32 Doc. 38.2; and
  - b) produce a consolidated set of recommendations for consideration by the Animals Committee at its 33rd meeting

5. The membership of the working group was agreed as follows:

Chair: representative for Central and South America and the Caribbean (Mr. Ramadori);

Members: alternate representative for Asia (Ms. Terada);

Parties: Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, European Union, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico, Peru, Portugal, Senegal, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America; and

IGOs and NGOs: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, International Union for Conservation of Nature, Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center, Association of Zoos and Aquariums, Center for Biological Diversity, Ornamental Fish International, Pet Advocacy Network, TRAFFIC, World Wide Fund for Nature, Zoological Society of London.

6. The intersessional working group worked through electronic means to implement the mandate. The recommendations Annexes 1 and 2 to document AC32 Doc. 38.1 (Rev.1) and the recommendations of the expert workshop contained in document AC32 Doc. 38.2 were presented in table format in all three working languages and circulated to members on 24 November 2023, with a deadline of 29 February 2024 for comment.

#### Conclusions of the working group

7. The working group has identified the following tools and training materials to help Parties implement the Appendix-II listing for live seahorses, which need to be developed in collaboration with species experts, subject to available resources:

- a) guidance on tracking extraction of wild broodstock for culture operations, and its implications for wild populations, whether F or C. This can be derived from existing guidance developed for Viet Nam (Project Seahorse 2015);
- b) guidance on how to distinguish between seahorses that are wild source, source code F and source code C, using recommendations from a previous CITES workshop as a starting point (Bruckner et al. 2005);
- c) identification guides for live trade and dried seahorses in multiple languages. These can be based on existing identification tools for seahorses (Project Seahorse 2021);
- d) guidance on the risks of aquaculture and releases to wild populations of CITES listed species. Guidance within CITES Resolution Conf. 17.8 under Option 2 of Annex 1 provides a good starting point for such an effort; and
- e) guidance on the risks of aquaculture and releases to wild populations of CITES listed species.

8. The working group recommends that Parties be invited to:

- a) use existing tools as appropriate for effective CITES implementation and enforcement that are relevant to seahorses (in support of CITES Decision 18.231), including, but not limited to, the tools available on the IUCN SSC Seahorse, Pipefish and Seadragon website ([www.iucn-seahorse.org/cites-toolkit](http://www.iucn-seahorse.org/cites-toolkit));
- b) enforce existing laws (e.g., trawling bans in specific areas, MPAs) which benefit the conservation of seahorses;
- c) inventory and assess seahorse aquaculture operations to determine their production capabilities, degree of reliance on wild populations, and any environmental concerns;
- d) ensure that any release of tank-bred seahorses only occurs in accordance with the best available scientific information to minimize negative impacts on wild populations and their habitat, including, but not limited to, guidelines established by the IUCN (<https://iucn-ctsg.org/policy-guidelines/conservation-translocation-guidelines/>) and never release alien species;

- e) ensure that national Management Authorities and Scientific Authorities have sufficient levels of staffing and funding to meet their obligations to the Convention;
  - f) raise awareness of seahorse trade and its role in conservation of the species with all stakeholders: fishers, traders, consumers, policy makers, enforcement agencies, judiciaries etc., subject to available resources;
  - g) access up-to-date trade research in collaboration with species experts, on which to base adaptive management plans in support of CITES implementation;
  - h) explore novel techniques for detecting seahorses in trade, such as eDNA or detector dogs;
  - i) develop monitoring programmes for seahorses in their national waters to understand effectiveness of their trade rules and any other relevant implementation and enforcement actions for seahorse conservation and management; and share the design and initial results of these programmes to assist other CITES Parties (in support of Decision 18.231b and c);
  - j) recall that the IUCN SSC Seahorse, Pipefish and Seadragon Specialist Group is available to provide advice;
  - k) add seahorses to existing fisheries monitoring programmes, making specific records for seahorses instead of including them under generic categories such as “trash fish”, “miscellaneous fish” or “fish NES”;
  - l) create monitoring programmes that include seahorses and other CITES species (e.g., sharks and rays, sea cucumbers, etc.) as fishers and buyers often catch/trade in multiple species;
  - m) collaborate with external partners (academia, non-governmental organizations, industry) in monitoring seahorse populations, especially where catch and/or trade are suspended/banned;
  - n) collaborate with external information sources (e.g., dive groups, non-governmental organizations, academic institutions), to obtain in-water data on seahorse distributions and populations; and
  - o) find ways to analyse existing monitoring data and to disseminate their findings, perhaps through collaborations with external partners.
9. The working group recommends that importing Parties be invited to:
- a) request information on non-detriment findings (NDFs) and legal acquisitions findings (LAFs) when there are concerns about the validity of export permits, particularly for wild or captive-born seahorses; and
  - b) verify species identification on import. Identification can be done on a subset of individuals if a shipment is sufficiently large to preclude identification of all individuals.
10. The working group recommends that the Secretariat be requested to:
- a) create and publicize:
    - i) a repository on its website that includes a wide range of materials to support CITES implementation for seahorses, similar to that provided for sharks ([cites.org/eng/prog/shark](http://cites.org/eng/prog/shark)), for example (in support of Decision 18.228); and
    - ii) a depository for monitoring plans in support of adaptive management, similar to that which it has created for sharing non-detriment findings;
  - b) invite Parties to take note of the IUCN Resolution WWC-2020-Res-095 on seahorses;
  - c) recall that the IUCN SSC Seahorse, Pipefish and Seadragon Specialist Group is available to provide advice;

- d) invite Parties to consider whether the development of outreach material to consumers and/or the industry would be more appropriate; and
  - e) update its annual reporting guidelines to specify that live seahorses are to be reported as individuals (and dried seahorses in weight; Bruckner et al. 2005, Foster et al. 2016; Foster 2021).
11. The working group recommends that the Animals Committee be requested to:
- a) collate advice on monitoring “invisible” species like seahorses (cryptic, low density); and
  - b) establish common metrics for monitoring seahorses that all Parties could use, using information document CoP17 Inf. 65 as a starting point.
12. The working group recommended that the Animals Committee refer the following matters to the Standing Committee for its consideration:
- a) the need to develop guidance on how to make legal acquisitions findings (LAFs) for wild and source code F live seahorse exports. Such guidance is needed for seahorse trade generally (dried and live);
  - b) inviting Parties to provide information on how they are making taxon specific LAFs to be shared with other CITES Parties for their consideration. Parties could ask the Secretariat to create a depository for LAFs, similar to that they have created for sharing NDFs;
  - c) the need to constrain the operations of both traditional and mechanized non-selective fishing gear to reduce the impacts on seahorses, and to constrain illegal target methods of fishing seahorses;
  - d) conducting research on the convergence of seahorse illegal wildlife trade with that of other CITES-listed species, with the aim of understanding potential for synergies with respect to improving CITES implementation at national and global levels;
  - e) updating the list of seahorse relevant regulations in Table 7 of the report “Implementation of CITES Appendix II listing for seahorses in the context of export bans and suspensions”, which can be found in document [SC74 Doc. 70.1](#) to inform enforcement efforts and provide the basis for making LAFs should they re-open trade;
  - f) ways to improve data collection on and from seahorse seizures, particularly with respect to species identification, shipment routes and other wildlife in the shipment, subject to available resources. Parties are encouraged to share specimens and/or data with species experts, including the IUCN SSC SPS SG, for analysis;
  - g) developing toolkits for training enforcement bodies (including frontline officers), prosecutors, judges, etc. in detecting and prosecuting IWT for the oft overlooked marine taxa such as seahorses;
  - h) consider best practice approaches for dealing with seahorse stockpiles; and
  - i) review options for seahorse traceability systems.

#### Recommendations

13. The Animals Committee is invited to:
- a) consider the recommendations in paragraphs 7 to 11 and make recommendations, as appropriate; and
  - b) refer the recommendations in paragraph 12 to the Standing Committee for further consideration.