

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



Seventy-eighth meeting of the Standing Committee
Geneva (Switzerland), 3-8 February 2025

Species conservation and trade

Fauna

Aquatic species

Seahorses (*Hippocampus* spp.)

REPORT OF THE ANIMALS COMMITTEE

1. This document has been submitted by the Chair of the Animals Committee and the Secretariat. The first part outlines the outcomes of the 33rd meeting of the Animals Committee (AC33; Geneva, July 2024); and the second part discusses the recommendations referred to the Standing Committee by the Animals Committee.

Outcomes of the 32nd meeting of the Animals Committee

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 19.229, 19.231 and 19.232 as follows:

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:*
 - 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.*

Directed to the Standing Committee

19.232 *The Standing Committee shall:*

- a) *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, as appropriate, the report of the Animals Committee produced in support of Decision 19.231;*
- b) *develop recommendations to the Parties and the Secretariat, as appropriate, to strengthen CITES implementation and enforcement for international trade in seahorses; and*
- c) *report on the implementation of Decisions 19.228 to 19.232 to the Conference of the Parties at its 20th meeting.*

3. At its 32nd meeting (AC32; Geneva, June 2023), the Animals 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 to 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 contained 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 (IUCN-SSC SPS SG) and the Zoological Society of London-Philippines and co-hosted by the Philippines.
4. At AC32, the Animals Committee agreed to establish 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 and its conclusions were reported to the Animals Committee at its 33rd meeting (AC33; Geneva, July 2024) in document [AC33 Doc. 42.2](#).

Outcome of the 33rd meeting of the Animals Committee (AC33; Geneva, July 2024)

7. At AC33, the Animals Committee considered documents [AC33 Doc. 42.1](#) and [AC33 Doc. 42.2](#), which were submitted by the Secretariat and the Chair of the Animals Committee intersessional working group on seahorses, respectively.
8. In document AC33 Doc. 42.1, the Secretariat summarized key aspects contained in the responses from Parties to Notification to the Parties [No. 2024/027](#) regarding *Request for information on the development of national or regional action plans to improve CITES implementation for seahorses* (*Hippocampus spp.*). Some Parties had taken significant steps that align with Decision 19.229. Where not yet done, source, transit and consumer Parties affected by illegal and/or unsustainable international trade in seahorses were encouraged to pursue similar activities, drawing upon the knowledge and experiences gained by other Parties. Among the challenges highlighted by Parties were substantial data gaps regarding seahorse populations and trade dynamics, as well as limited financial, technical, and human resources to implement conservation and enforcement measures.
9. The Animals Committee noted document [AC33 Doc. 42.1](#) and the information provided by Parties in their responses to the Notification and agreed to propose to the Conference of the Parties the renewal of Decision 19.229. The Committee also noted that, as requested by Mexico, paragraph 18 of document AC33 Doc. 42.1 should indicate that the number of recorded seized dried seahorse specimens is 4,946 (and not 5,975).
10. Document [AC33 Doc. 42.2](#) presented the outcomes of the work of the intersessional working group on *Seahorses* and proposed recommendations in paragraphs 7 to 12 for consideration by the Animals Committee.
11. At AC33, the Animals Committee agreed the recommendations presented in the Annex to document AC33 Doc. 42.2, including the submission of a set of draft decisions on seahorses for consideration at the 20th meeting of the Conference of the Parties.
12. The Animals Committee agreed to refer the following recommendations (from paragraph 12 of document AC33 Doc. 42.2) to the Standing Committee for further consideration:
- The need to develop guidance on how to make Legal Acquisition Findings (LAFs) for wild and source code F live seahorse exports. Such guidance is needed for seahorse trade generally (dried and live);
 - 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 non-detriment findings (NDFs);
 - 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 (IWT) with that of other CITES-listed species, with the aim of understanding the 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.

Discussion of the recommendations referred to the Standing Committee

13. With regard to recommendations a), b), e) and i), the Secretariat notes that Resolution Conf. 18.7 (Rev. CoP19) on *Legal acquisition findings*, and particularly the *Rapid guide for the making of legal acquisition findings* (Annex 3), contain detailed guidance to assist Management Authorities when establishing and following processes to make legal acquisition findings for different taxa. The ‘Rapid Guide’ also proposes a definition and guidance concerning traceability as the ability to follow the trail of specimens along the supply chain by monitoring and tracking the chain of custody. In Decisions 19.128 and 19.129 on *Legal acquisition findings*, the Conference of the Parties invited Parties to test the ‘Rapid guide’, to offer, upon request, peer assistance to other Parties for the improvement of their capacity to verify legal acquisition for different taxa, and to provide observations and feedback to the Secretariat following their tested use of the Rapid guide. At its 77th meeting, the Standing Committee also invited Parties to, where possible, share their legal acquisition findings to build knowledge and share best practices regarding the implementation of Resolution Conf. 18.7 (Rev. CoP19). These matters are addressed in document SC78 Doc. 47 on *Legal acquisition findings*. In light of the above, the Secretariat considers that recommendations a), b), e) and i) are addressed in the existing work on legal acquisitions findings and considers that it is premature to propose species specific guidance for LAFs without having collected best practices regarding the implementation of Resolution Conf. 18.7 (Rev. CoP19) (see proposed draft decisions in document SC78 Doc. 47).
14. With regard to recommendation h), the Secretariat notes that, under Decision 17.170 (Rev. CoP19), the Standing Committee, with the support of the Secretariat, is reviewing the existing provisions agreed by the Parties concerning controls on stockpiles of specimens of CITES-listed species. These questions are addressed in document SC78 Doc. 53 on *Stocks and stockpiles*. Guidance on management of stockpiles exists in the *Practical Guidance for the management of ivory stockpiles, including their disposal* and *Ensuring Effective Stockpile Management: A Guidance Document*. In this document, Parties are encouraged to use this guidance for the management of stockpiles of other species where the guidance can be applied and provide feedback to the Secretariat on the use of the guidance. With regard to recommendation h), the Secretariat considers that generic guidance for the management of stockpiles can be applied to seahorses.
15. Concerning recommendations c), d), f), g) and i), the Secretariat proposes to take these into consideration in the implementation of Decision 19.228, which also makes reference to the studies prepared in response to Decision 18.229 paragraph c) i), from which many of these recommendations were extracted. An update on the implementation of Decision 19.228 is presented in the report of the Secretariat on seahorses (document SC78 Doc. 71.2). With regard to recommendations c), d), f), g) and i), the Secretariat proposes that these be considered after completion of the report on global illegal trade in seahorses called for in Decision 19.228.

Recommendations

16. The Standing Committee is invited to:

- a) note the outcome of the discussions on seahorses from AC33 as presented in the Annex to this document, including a new set of decisions and the intention of the Animals Committee to propose to the Conference of the Parties the renewal of Decision 19.229;
- b) agree that Decision 19.231 has been implemented and can be proposed for deletion; and
- c) consider the recommendations referred to it by the Animals Committee in paragraph 12 and the comments from the Secretariat outlined in paragraphs 13 to 15.

OUTCOME OF THE 33RD MEETING OF THE ANIMALS COMMITTEE CONCERNING SEAHORSES
(EXTRACTED FROM [AC33 SUMMARY RECORD](#))

The Animals Committee requested the Secretariat to publish a Notification inviting Parties, in collaboration with species experts and/or relevant stakeholders, such as the IUCN SSC Seahorse, Pipefish and Seadragon Specialist Group, to develop the following guidance and submit it to the Secretariat for publication on the CITES website:

- a) guidance on tracking extraction of wild broodstock for culture operations, and its implications for wild populations, whether source code 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 and benefits of aquaculture and releases to wild populations of seahorses. Guidance within CITES Resolution Conf. 17.8 (Rev. CoP19) on *Disposal of illegally traded and confiscated specimens of CITES-listed species* under Option 2 of Annex 1 provides a good starting point for such an effort;
- e) guidance on monitoring cryptic (small-sized, low-density and camouflaged) species like seahorses; and
- f) guidance on common metrics for monitoring seahorses that all Parties could use, using information document CoP17 Inf. 65 as a starting point.

To support Parties to implement the Convention in relation to seahorses, the Animals Committee requested the Secretariat to publish a Notification inviting Parties to consider the following actions/activities:

- a) use existing tools as appropriate for effective CITES implementation and enforcement that are relevant to seahorses, including, but not limited to, the tools available on the IUCN SSC Seahorse, Pipefish and Seadragon website (www.iucn-seahorse.org/cites-toolkit);
- b) inventory and assess seahorse aquaculture operations to determine their production capabilities, degree of reliance on wild populations, and any environmental concerns;
- c) 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;
- d) 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;
- e) explore novel techniques for detecting seahorses in trade, such as eDNA or detector dogs;
- f) develop monitoring programmes, such as fisheries monitoring programmes for fisheries that catch seahorses (including bycatch), to understand effectiveness of trade rules and any other relevant implementation and enforcement actions for seahorse conservation and management. These monitoring programmes can consider the following, *inter alia*:

- i) adding seahorses to existing fisheries monitoring programmes for fisheries that catch seahorses (including bycatch), making specific records for seahorses instead of including them under generic categories such as “trash fish”, “miscellaneous fish” or “fish NES”;
 - ii) collaborating with external partners and information sources (e.g. academia, non-governmental organizations, industry, dive groups, citizen scientists) in monitoring seahorse populations and distributions;
 - iii) finding ways to analyse existing monitoring data and to disseminate their findings, perhaps through collaborations with external partners; and
 - iv) accessing up-to-date trade research in collaboration with species experts, on which to base adaptive management plans in support of CITES implementation; and
- g) share the design and initial results of these monitoring programmes to assist other CITES Parties.

The Animals Committee:

- a) reminded Parties that strict enforcement of existing laws can benefit the conservation of seahorses (e.g., capture bans, trawling bans in specific areas, Marine Protected Areas);
- b) reminded importing Parties of the provisions under “Regarding exercising due diligence” of Resolution Conf. 11.3 (Rev. CoP19) on *Compliance and enforcement* and remind Parties to:
 - i) request information on non-detriment findings (NDFs) and legal acquisitions findings (LAFs) when there are concerns about the validity of export permits; and
 - ii) 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;
- c) invited Parties to take note of the IUCN Resolution WWC-2020-Res-095 on seahorses and of the offer of support of the IUCN SSC Seahorse, Pipefish and Seadragon Specialist Group; and
- d) agreed to refer to the Standing Committee the proposed update to the *Guidelines for the preparation and submission of CITES annual reports* and the *Guidelines for the preparation and submission of CITES annual illegal trade reports* so that dried seahorses are reported in weight.
- e) agreed to submit the following draft decisions to the Conference of the Parties:

Directed to the Secretariat

20.AA *Subject to external funding, the Secretariat shall create and publicize a webpage on seahorses on the CITES website as a repository for a wide range of materials to support CITES implementation for seahorses, including monitoring plans in support of adaptive management and any guidance developed by Parties and relevant stakeholders.*

Directed to Parties and relevant stakeholders

20.BB *Parties, intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations, academic sector, industry and other stakeholders are invited to provide any relevant information to support CITES implementation for seahorses to be included by the Secretariat on the CITES seahorse webpage, as appropriate.*

Directed to Parties

20.CC *Parties are encouraged to implement the recommendations contained in paragraphs 1 and 2 of AC33 Com. 4, in particular that in paragraph f) that invites Parties to develop monitoring programmes, such as fisheries monitoring programmes for fisheries that catch seahorses (including bycatch), to understand effectiveness of trade rules and any other relevant implementation and enforcement actions for the conservation and management of seahorses.*