

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



Seventy-third meeting of the Standing Committee
Online meeting, 5-7 May 2021

Strategic matters

IMPLICATIONS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC
ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CONVENTION

1. This document has been prepared by the Secretariat.

Background

2. A first draft of this document was posted on the CITES website on 28 January 2021 as document SC2021 Doc. 1. In Notification to the Parties No. 2021/013, the Secretariat invited Parties and observers to submit comments on it. The Secretariat would like to thank Japan, New Zealand and the United States of America, as well as the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, the Association of Midwest Fish and Wildlife Agencies, the Northeast Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, Species Survival Network, Wildlife Conservation Society and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) for providing comments and suggestions which have been used to prepare the present document.
3. The COVID-19 disease pandemic, caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) has impacted States around the world, including all CITES Parties. It has significantly disrupted everyday life and with it, in all probability, the implementation of CITES for many Parties. The disruption to the implementation of the Convention from the effects of COVID-19 follows that caused by the last-minute rescheduling and relocation of the 18th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (CoP) and associated meetings of the Standing Committee (SC) in 2019 after the tragic events which occurred in Sri Lanka on 21 April 2019. On that occasion, the Secretariat observed that contingency plans for the Convention in the event of an emergency situation were not as well-developed as they could have been, and that Parties may need to consider the need for the Convention to be better prepared in the future for unplanned eventualities. The emergence of COVID-19 has reinforced this impression.
4. Measures taken by governments to halt the spread of the virus have had significant economic impacts. In relation to CITES implementation, these measures have led to restrictions on the ability of employees to attend their place of work; 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.
5. The present document aims to summarize the actions of Parties and the Secretariat in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, review the impacts of the pandemic on the ability of the Convention bodies to implement the Convention and consider possible responses to such events in the future.

Effects of COVID-19 on the operation of the Convention

National CITES authorities

6. 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. The Secretariat has however not undertaken a systematic survey of the experiences of Parties in implementing the Convention during the pandemic but intends to do so.

7. The World Trade Organization is projecting a 9.2% fall in the volume of world merchandise trade in 2020, followed by a 7.2% rise in 2021, leaving trade well below its pre-pandemic trend. However, the effect on international trade in specimens of CITES-listed species will only be known when the annual reports for 2020 are submitted on or before 31 October 2021. Tourism has also been heavily affected, including in many African Parties, leaving a significant income gap. There are anecdotal reports that illegal killing of and trade in wildlife has increased as a result of hardship caused by lack of other livelihood opportunities.

Governing bodies and scientific advisory committees of CITES

8. Although the future impacts of the pandemic are uncertain, at the time of writing, the Secretariat is proceeding with planning for the 19th meeting of the CoP in Costa Rica in its habitual format in 2022. The pandemic has however had a significant impact for the intersessional work of the SC, Animals Committee (AC) and Plants Committee (PC), in particular on their meetings.
9. Concerning decision-making in relation to the convening of intersessional meetings of the committees, Article XII of the Convention charges the Secretariat to arrange for and service meetings of the Parties and to perform any other function as may be entrusted to it by the Parties. In doing so, the Secretariat must follow United Nations rules and regulations. In the face of unexpected events, the Secretariat needs to seek the advice of the Standing Committee as the latter is charged in paragraph 2 of Annex 1 to Resolution Conf. 18.2, *inter alia*, with providing operational direction to the Secretariat concerning the implementation of the Convention between meetings of the CoP; coordination and advice as required to the other committees; and such interim activities on behalf of the CoP as may be necessary, including advising on emerging operational issues identified by Parties or the Secretariat until direction on the matter is provided by the CoP. Throughout 2020 therefore, the Secretariat has provided advice to and sought guidance from the Standing Committee in relation to its meetings and those of the Animals and Plants Committees.
10. For the 31st meeting of the AC (AC31) and 25th meeting of the PC (PC25), planned for Geneva, Switzerland, on 13-17 July 2020 and 17/20-23 July 2020, respectively, the Secretariat provided [a scenario analysis](#) of the prospects for the meetings to the Standing Committee on 1 May 2020 with an addendum on 5 May 2020. The SC Chair shared this analysis with the AC and PC Chairs requesting the views of the Committees.
11. On 11 May 2020, the AC Chair reported that the majority of members favoured the postponement of AC31, and the PC Chair stressed that her members were not in favour of holding PC25 online. Both provided the detailed views of their members to the Chair of the SC. Taking account of these views and those of the SC members provided by email, on 27 May 2020, the SC advised the Secretariat to postpone the AC and PC meetings to 2021 and in the interim, the AC and PC Chairs, with the members, should review their workplans and, with support of the Secretariat, consider ways for addressing the intersessional work instructed to them by the CoP.
12. The 73rd meeting of the SC (SC73) was scheduled to take place from 5 to 9 October 2020 in Geneva, Switzerland. On 17 June 2020, the Secretariat provided the SC with [a similar analysis](#) to that provided in relation to AC31 and PC25. The Secretariat organized an online question and answer session about the analysis for SC members on 1 July 2020. On 14 July 2020, the Standing Committee advised the Secretariat to cancel the meeting that was foreseen to be held in Geneva from 5 to 9 October 2020 and review the work given to the Committee by the CoP in order to develop an approach to the SC workplan in September 2020.
13. As part of these analyses, the Secretariat also reviewed the intersessional work programmes for the three Committees, assessed online meeting platforms and reviewed the application of the existing Rules of Procedure to online meetings. Subsequently, all three Committees have agreed on roadmaps to take forward their work intersessionally which are being used to guide their subsequent work. For the AC and PC, this

process was assisted by the fact that all documents for AC31 and PC25 had been prepared and posted on the CITES website.

14. As decided by the Conference of the Parties in Resolution Conf. 18.1, all regular meetings of the CITES committees are held in Switzerland unless a candidate host country pays the difference in costs between its proposed venue and Switzerland. In Geneva, the Secretariat is able to use rooms at the Centre International de Conférences Genève (CICG), where the costs of renting the meeting facilities are generously covered by Switzerland. The budget for meeting organization in the costed programme of work of the Secretariat, agreed by the CoP, assumes that such support from Switzerland will be forthcoming. In order to secure rooms at the appropriate times in the Convention meeting cycle, the meeting facilities at CICG need to be booked typically five years in advance.
15. It should be noted that when a meeting has to be postponed, due to the great demand for meeting facilities it is difficult to secure an alternative reservation at CICG within a year of the original date of the meeting. Additionally, the CICG is closed for renovation during the period January to June 2021. The Secretariat therefore entered into negotiations with the United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG) in order to use United Nations facilities at the Palais des Nations. The cost of the meeting facilities there would be minimal. The Secretariat further searched for opportunities to hold meetings in other meeting facilities in Geneva and Switzerland. For the most part, these would need to be rented on a commercial basis and therefore costs could be higher, and allowance would need to be made for travel and subsistence costs for Secretariat staff if they were outside Geneva. No suitable locations at an affordable cost have been identified at the time of writing.
16. Because of the postponement of the three committee meetings in 2020, there were unspent funds in the Trust Fund budget for 2020 and these needed to be rolled forward to 2021, so that they could be used to cover meeting costs in 2021 which may be higher than usually experienced. Using its intersessional decision-making procedure, the Standing Committee approved a recommendation from its Finance and Budget Subcommittee (FBSC), to approve, on a one-time and exceptional basis, the transfer of the funds, in the amount of USD 280,700, from 2020 related to AC, PC and SC meetings that could not be convened. This decision was conveyed to Parties and observers in Notification to the Parties No. 2021/015 of 4 February 2021.
17. For the meetings of the SC, the Secretariat had secured facilities for two dates in 2021 (4-9 April and 18-25 September) for meetings at the Palais des Nations and at CICG. No such possibilities are available for the AC and PC meetings. The Secretariat issued Notification to the Parties No. 2020/046 on 4 June 2020, inviting Parties to express an initial interest in hosting AC31 and/or PC25. In December 2020 France replied that they may be able to act as a host and the Secretariat is in communication with France about when and how it may be possible to accept this offer. Although some meetings facilities have been reserved and an offer to host meetings received, other challenges remain, notably restrictions on travel of members which may make the establishment of a quorum for meetings in 2021 difficult. Whilst the Parties who are members of the SC may be able to call on staff from their diplomatic corps wherever a meeting is held, the members of the AC and PC are individuals, making the establishment of a quorum more challenging. After an informal online discussion on 12 January 2021, the Standing Committee agreed to convene online at the present meeting and the Animals and Plants Committees have also agreed to convene online in late May/June 2021.. Future arrangements for meetings of the Standing Committee will be discussed under agenda item 28 at the present meeting.
18. 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.

CITES Secretariat

19. As employees of the United Nations, the staff of the Secretariat have been following guidance issued by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and UNOG and regulations established by the federal and local authorities of the host country, Switzerland. Secretariat staff have been primarily working from home since 13 March 2020. Internal communications were maintained through email, Microsoft Teams, Signal and other secure means. The Secretariat's general telephone number and email address (info@cites.org) continued to function as normal and all staff were able to assist Parties through their direct office telephone number and email addresses as usual. From 8 June 2020, following strict safety protocols in line with the requirements of the United Nations and Swiss authorities, staff gradually began to return to the office, subject to limitations on the number of persons in the building where the Secretariat's offices are situated. However, following a second wave of cases of COVID-19 at the duty station, a return to full-time working from home was instated on 19 October 2020 and this remains in place at the time of writing. The Secretariat issued Notification to the Parties [No. 2020/025](#) on its work on 17 March 2020.

Lessons learnt

National CITES authorities

20. The Secretariat observed that in the prevailing circumstances informal online dialogue between Parties seems to have increased. Party representatives have also had the opportunity to join online briefings on various subjects organized by a variety of stakeholders at a fraction of the cost of having to travel to these events in person. Examples include: regional teleconference of Spanish-speaking Parties of the Central and South America and the Caribbean region (1 April 2020); informal online meetings in English and French between Parties of West and North Africa convened by Morocco as regional member of the Standing Committee (4 and 6 May 2020); a Central American sub-regional workshop on sharks and rays convened by Honduras as regional member of the Standing Committee (8 October 2020), an online meeting between Antigua and Barbuda, Aruba, Bahamas, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago with a view to establishing a Caribbean Wildlife Consortium (19 November 2020) and an online meeting of jaguar range States (23 November 2020).

Governing bodies and scientific advisory committees of CITES

21. The events surrounding the relocation of CoP18 from Colombo, Sri Lanka to Geneva, Switzerland and the postponement and possible cancellation of SC73, AC31 and PC25 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic have reinforced the need for better contingency measure to be put in place in case of such eventualities.
22. In case of unforeseen events affecting meetings of the CoP, the Secretariat has always held a backup reservation at the CICG. However, cancelling these reservations too close to the actual meeting dates can result in penalty charges and so they are normally cancelled well ahead of the date of the planned CoP, leaving the risk of unexpected events occurring after cancellation, but before the date of the meeting. Enquiries made during 2020 have revealed that standard United Nations Special Events insurance and Malicious Acts insurance which apply to events held by the Secretariat are too limited in scope to be useful in the sorts of circumstances that occurred in relation to the planned CoP18 in Sri Lanka and the COVID-19 pandemic.
23. Resolution Conf. 18.1 affirms that no more than two regular meetings of each of the three committees should be convened between regular meetings of the CoP. However, the volume of instructions given to the committees at recent CoPs has increased substantially (see Table 1 below), meaning that the role and significance of committee meetings has increased accordingly, resulting in significant impacts if face-to-face meetings cannot be held.

Table 1 – Decisions directed to the SC and scientific committees since 2010

Decisions directed to	CoP15 (2010)	CoP16 (2013)	CoP17 (2016)	CoP18 (2019)
Animals Committee	15	19	31	30
Plants Committee	20	12	26	17
Standing Committee	30	49	79	86
Total	65	80	136	133

24. The increase in workload for the committees has reinforced the need for them to begin work as soon as possible after the closing of a meeting of the CoP. The Standing Committee holds a short formal meeting at the close of each meeting of the CoP. Originally, this was merely to elect its officers, but more recently it has been used to embark on some planning for its intersessional activities, even if it is difficult to know the full extent of these immediately after CoP. As provided for in their Rules of procedure, the AC and PC meet after each CoP to elect their Chair and Vice-Chair. They have also used these gatherings to start their intersessional work planning. However, these can be handicapped by the fact that not all of the individual experts who are members of the committees attend meetings of the CoP.
25. 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.
26. 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.
27. Concerning face-to-face meetings, the Secretariat has reviewed the participation of Parties at regular meetings of the SC, AC and PC in the two intersessional periods between CoP16 and CoP17 and CoP17 and CoP18 (Table 2).

Table 2. Number of regular SC, AC and PC meetings between CoP16 and CoP18 at which Parties have participated (Twelve meetings held in total)

Attendance	Number of Parties
All 12 of the meetings	14
9-11 meetings	22
4-8 meetings	26
1-3 meetings	49
None of the 12 meetings	73

During that period, 73 Parties (40%) did not attend any of the regular meetings of SC, AC or PC. A further 49 (27%) only attended infrequently – one to three of the twelve meetings held. It is clear that many Parties are either unwilling or unable to participate in intersessional work of the committees as it is currently conducted. This may be due to a lack of interest or relevance but is also likely to be related to the cost of attending meetings in locations where the travel costs are significant, and the cost of living is high. Encouraging wider participation of Parties in intersessional CITES activities is a challenge for both online and face-to-face meetings.

28. Online meetings may offer one way to get better engagement in the work of the Convention from a wider range of Parties. Conducting some of the committees' intersessional business online in future would also contribute to the Convention's efforts to reduce its carbon footprint. The Secretariat observes that considerable progress has been made with online meeting technology over the year. During this time, the Secretariat successfully organized two workshops for Parties in West Asia on the National Legislation Project in July and on e-permitting in November, together with two online meetings of the SC's intersessional advisory group on Malagasy palisanders and rosewoods (*Dalbergia* spp.) and ebonies (*Diospyros* spp.). The Secretariat also organized a very-well attended online workshop with the World Customs Organization in December 2020 on permit issues and customs controls, with more than 30 Parties and 200 participants from both customs and Management Authorities participating. During the course of the year, the Secretariat has also secured permission at the level of UNEP administration to cover some of the communication costs of committee members whilst participating in online meetings. Face-to-face meetings offer greater possibility for 'corridor discussions' for those able to attend them, but many Parties encounter financial challenges in doing so. However, participating in online meetings may present other difficulties to Parties, particularly in relation to the availability of suitable information technology and reliable electronic communications.

Ensuring transparency and a fair and equitable access to meetings for Parties and observers was stressed by a number of Parties and observers commenting on an earlier draft of this document.

CITES Secretariat

29. The Secretariat has been able to maintain regular services to Parties during the COVID-19 pandemic despite the fact that staff have been telecommuting for much of 2020 and the first quarter of 2021. Communication systems to maintain contact between staff have generally worked well, although these sometimes require more time than traditional face-to-face exchanges in an office environment. Aside from the additional logistical work in relation to the meetings and activities of the committees, difficulties have also occurred in relation to activities that required staff travel, which has not been permitted since mid-March 2020 and with the organization of workshops and other similar events and the implementation of related Decisions. Consequently, some externally funded activities and projects have been delayed and the Secretariat thanks donors that have permitted an extension to their funding contracts. Although some work had to be deferred because of the inability of staff to travel or convene workshops and other meetings, there was an increase in workload in other areas such as scenario and contingency planning for meetings
30. In terms of meeting organization, the Secretariat, exchanged experiences with UNEP Senior Management and UNEP administered Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs), fellow members of the Liaison Group of the Biodiversity-Related Conventions and with the InforMEA, the International Annual Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications (IAMLADP) and the UN Governing Bodies Secretariats forums. In particular, this exchange of information and experiences enabled the Secretariat to have a better understanding of the possibilities and constraints of using online and hybrid meetings, including legal and procedural aspects.

Recommendations

31. In order for the Convention to be better prepared to cope with unexpected events such as the COVID-19 pandemic in the future, the Secretariat wishes to propose recommendations under the following themes for the consideration of the Conference of the Parties at its 19th meeting (CoP19). Before doing so, the Secretariat would appreciate the comments of the Standing Committee and in particular reflections from the Committee and observer Parties about the difficulties in the domestic implementation of the Convention that have been experienced by CITES authorities in 2020 and the first quarter of 2021.
32. The recommendations of the Secretariat are likely to cover the following areas:
 - a) establishment of a structured, risk-assessment approach for the Standing Committee to determine the 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.
33. In order to ensure that the document presented to CoP19 forms a good basis for further discussions, the Secretariat would appreciate receiving comments on its scope and objectives.