

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

Seventy-fourth meeting of the Standing Committee  
Lyon (France), 7 - 11 March 2022

Species specific matters

ILLEGAL TRADE IN CHEETAHS (*ACINONYX JUBATUS*)

1. This document has been submitted by Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Yemen.\*

Background

2. The issue of illegal trade in cheetahs has been on the agenda of CITES meetings since Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda submitted document [CoP16 Doc. 51](#)<sup>1</sup> to the sixteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties (Bangkok, Thailand, 2013). That document outlined widespread reports of illegal trade in live specimens, the majority relating to cubs, with a high percentage of the cheetahs allegedly dying either during transit or shortly after confiscation. The Middle East was reported to be an important destination for traded cheetahs stemming from the practice of keeping them as pets and of using them for sport hunting, while the Horn of Africa, and especially Somalia, was indicated in the document as representing a commonly used transit route for the illegal trafficking of cheetahs. The illegal wildlife trade is threatening the local subspecies, *A. j. soemmeringii*, with extinction. This subspecies has already declined to dangerously low numbers, with the remaining population estimated at only around 300 adults and adolescents ([Durant et al. 2017](#))<sup>2</sup>. There is a risk that this subspecies may disappear within our lifetime if the trade is not stopped.
3. As a result of the discussion of CoP16 Doc. 51, CoP16 adopted Decisions 16.71 to 16.75, which mandated the Secretariat to commission a study on illegal trade in cheetahs, whose findings were presented to the twenty-seventh meeting of the Animals Committee (Veracruz, Mexico, 2014) in Document [AC27 Doc. 18](#)<sup>3</sup>. The principal findings of the study were as follows:
  - a) East Africa was the region with the highest recorded levels of illegal trade in live cheetahs, and where this trade likely has the greatest negative impact on wild populations, while the Middle East, and notably the Gulf States, was the primary destination, with the cheetahs transiting via the Horn of Africa and Yemen.
  - b) The study encouraged Parties with consumer markets for live cheetahs to ensure that the effective implementation of the Convention is supported by national policies on ownership and trade in big cats.

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\* 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.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cites.org/sites/default/files/eng/cop/16/doc/E-CoP16-51.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Durant, Sarah M., Nicholas Mitchell, Rosemary Groom, Nathalie Pettorelli, Audrey Ipavec, Andrew P. Jacobson, Rosie Woodroffe et al. "The global decline of cheetah *Acinonyx jubatus* and what it means for conservation." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 114, no. 3 (2017): 528-533.

<sup>3</sup> <https://cites.org/sites/default/files/eng/com/ac/27/E-AC27-18.pdf>

- c) East African countries could benefit from the development and adoption of a common strategy to deal more effectively with confiscated live cheetahs.
  - d) It was unclear whether South African authorities could certify with confidence that all live cheetahs that are exported as specimens bred in captivity meet all the Convention's bred-in-captivity conditions.
  - e) Little information was available on the illegal trade in live cheetahs, cheetah skins or other specimens in northern, western and central Africa, or in the Islamic Republic of Iran – home to the last population of the Asiatic cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus venaticus*), but the conservation status of cheetahs in these regions might have deteriorated to the point that the impact of any illegal trade could be significant.
4. The Animals Committee, at that meeting, and later the Standing Committee, at its 65<sup>th</sup> meeting (Geneva, Switzerland, 2014) considered the study and agreed that a face-to-face workshop of range and consumer countries be convened to consider information sought from Parties and make appropriate recommendations. The Standing Committee established an intersessional working group to facilitate this process. The workshop was subsequently convened in Kuwait City, Kuwait, in 2015. Based on the outcomes of the workshop, the intersessional working group made recommendations to the 66<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Standing Committee (Geneva, Switzerland, 2016), set out in [SC66 Doc. 32.5](#)<sup>4</sup>. These may be summarised as follows:
- a) Cheetah range States and Parties implicated in the illegal trade in cheetahs were encouraged to: develop and launch national public awareness campaigns and demand reduction initiatives; to further strengthen national and regional enforcement actions; to make use of existing systems for exchange of information or establish such mechanisms; and to immediately bring information on poaching and illegal trade to the attention of relevant authorities in source, transit and destination countries; to request support from ICCWC partners and to conduct joint operations between East Africa and the Middle East;
  - b) The CITES Secretariat was requested, subject to available resources, to engage with relevant social media platforms, search engines and e-commerce platforms to address illegal international trade in cheetah through these platforms;
  - c) The Secretariat was invited to explore the establishment of a closed cheetah user group for relevant national competent authorities;
  - d) The Secretariat was also invited to assess the feasibility of creating a forum on the CITES website for Parties (both range states and non-range states), experts, NGOs and other stakeholders to exchange and share information on cheetahs;
  - e) Range, transit and destination countries were encouraged to collaborate on the humane disposal of confiscated live cheetahs;
  - f) Parties were requested to inform the Secretariat of facilities available for the disposal of confiscated live cheetahs; and
  - g) The Standing Committee was invited to adopt draft Decisions for transmission to the 17th meeting of the Conference of the Parties mandating the Secretariat to commission the development of a CITES cheetah trade resource kit.
5. At its 17th meeting (CoP17, Johannesburg, 2016), the Conference of the Parties adopted Decisions 17.124 to 17.130 on Illegal trade in cheetahs, which mandated the Secretariat to proceed with the development of the toolkit and to report to the Standing Committee on progress on all of the recommendations agreed at the 66<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Standing Committee, as outlined above.
6. The Secretariat reported to the 69<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Standing Committee on its efforts to oversee implementation of the recommendations of the 66<sup>th</sup> meeting of that Committee. This included reporting on the development of the toolkit and on efforts to implement the above-mentioned recommendations (Document [SC69 Doc. 45](#)<sup>5</sup>). Such efforts by Parties, which included any progress made on decisions relating to public awareness and education, cooperation and information exchange, enforcement, and suitable disposal options were assessed based on: a) information submitted by Parties in response to the

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<sup>4</sup> <https://cites.org/sites/default/files/eng/com/sc/66/E-SC66-32-05x.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://cites.org/sites/default/files/eng/com/sc/69/E-SC69-45.pdf>

Secretariat's [Notification to the Parties No. 2017/039](#) (15 May 2017)<sup>6</sup>. To this, only one Party, Yemen, responded; b) responses to a questionnaire to Parties ([Annex to Notification to the Parties No. 2018/058](#) (4 June 2018))<sup>7</sup>. Replies from 17 Parties<sup>8</sup> and one non-Party<sup>9</sup> were received based on official seizure records. However, information from key source Parties and regions was not submitted<sup>10</sup>.

7. The Secretariat also informed the Standing Committee of the development of the Joint CMS-CITES African Carnivores Initiative, focusing on cheetahs (*Acinonyx jubatus*), African wild dogs (*Lycaon pictus*), African lions (*Panthera leo*) and leopards (*Panthera pardus*).
8. The Secretariat reported further at the 70<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Standing Committee (Sochi, Russia, 2018). The Committee decided as follows<sup>11</sup>:
  - a) It invited the intersessional working group on cheetahs to review the draft CITES cheetah trade resource kit and the recommendations of the Secretariat as outlined in Decision 17.125 and to formulate comments and recommendations on the finalization and dissemination of the CITES cheetah trade resource kit for consideration by the Standing Committee at its 71st meeting;
  - b) It encouraged Parties to communicate the establishment of the cheetah closed user group to their relevant national authorities, and to encourage its use;
  - c) It also encouraged Parties affected by illegal trade of cheetahs on the Internet to, as appropriate, review their implementation of paragraphs 11 and 12 under "Regarding e-commerce of specimens of CITES-listed species", in Resolution Conf. 11.3 (Rev. CoP17) on *Compliance and enforcement*, and to pursue the full implementation of these provisions;
  - d) It also encouraged Parties affected by illegal trade in live cheetahs to, in accordance with the provisions of Annex 3 to Resolution Conf. 17.8 on Disposal of illegally traded and confiscated specimens of CITES-listed species, pursue the development of a plan of action that can be executed without delay in the event that live specimens are seized;
  - e) It encouraged Parties affected by illegal trade in cheetahs, in particular destination countries, to consider illegal trade in cheetahs in their implementation of Resolution Conf. 17.4 on *Demand reduction strategies to combat illegal trade in CITES-listed species*; and
  - f) It noted the concerns expressed by Parties, such as Ethiopia, Kenya and the United States of America, regarding illegal trade in cheetahs.
9. The 71<sup>st</sup> meeting of the Standing Committee (Geneva, Switzerland, 2019) tasked the Secretariat with revision and promulgation of the enforcement toolkit.
10. At CoP 18 (Geneva, Switzerland, 2019), the Secretariat offered a document ([CoP18 Doc.60](#))<sup>12</sup> which reported on progress with the establishment of the African Carnivores Initiative and, to abide by Decision 17.127, on progress in the implementation of the SC66 recommendations. The [webpage for cheetahs](#)<sup>13</sup> on CITES' website was reported to be created as was a closed user group on cheetah on the WCO CENComm platform for information exchange ([SC66 Doc 32.5 Rec. 18 d\) and e\)](#)). As mentioned above (see SC69 summary), reports on progress in regards to other SC66 recommendations, namely those that relate to Parties' actions against the trade, reflected partial information. Yet, the Secretariat proposed the deletion of the CoP17 Decisions and adoption of a single Decision mandating the Secretariat to make

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<sup>6</sup> [https://www.cites.org/sites/default/files/notif/E-Notif-2017-039\\_0.pdf](https://www.cites.org/sites/default/files/notif/E-Notif-2017-039_0.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.cites.org/sites/default/files/notif/E-Notif-2018-059-A.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Angola, Bahrain, Benin, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Namibia, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, South Africa, Thailand, United Arab Emirates, Yemen, Zambia and Zimbabwe

<sup>9</sup> South Sudan

<sup>10</sup> Kenya, Ethiopia and the north-western part of Somalia

<sup>11</sup> See paragraph 43 of [SC70 SR](#) <https://cites.org/sites/default/files/eng/com/sc70/exsum/E-SC70-SR.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <https://cites.org/sites/default/files/eng/cop/18/doc/E-CoP18-060.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> [https://cites.org/eng/prog/terrestrial\\_fauna/cheetahs](https://cites.org/eng/prog/terrestrial_fauna/cheetahs)

the final version of the CITES cheetah trade resource kit available in the languages and formats agreed by the Standing Committee. The CoP adopted this Decision as Decision 18.193.

11. Also at CoP18, Kenya and Ethiopia submitted [CoP18 Inf. 73](#)<sup>14</sup>, Annex 1 of which noted that the cheetah is now confined to just 9% of its historical range with a global population estimate of only 7,100. It notes that being increasingly small and isolated, cheetah populations in the Horn of Africa, where recorded incidents indicate that the majority of the illegally traded cheetah are sourced, suffer the strongest impacts of the illegal trade. CoP18 Inf. 73 commented on the Secretariat's conclusion that "Although there is some illegal international trade in cheetahs, the available information suggests that this remains limited" ([SC70 Doc. 43](#))<sup>15</sup> and highlighted that the Secretariat's conclusion is derived from limited evidence and should not be the sole basis for assessing the scale and significance of illegal trade in cheetah since they only include official records and omit data from key primary source countries. It further points to records compiled by the Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF) which show the official numbers reported in SC70 Doc. 43 represent just 6.2% of the total 513 cheetahs or products known from all sources to have been illegally traded during the reviewed period. The document emphasized that any level of illegal trade targeting small and vulnerable populations close to smuggling routes will increase their risk of extinction, and as such the number of animals in illegal trade should not be seen as a measure of the seriousness of the trade without consideration of the size and demographics of the populations affected. The document also noted that in the same period, 612 advertisements in online marketplaces and social media had been posted, mostly by users in Gulf Cooperation Council States, offering at least 900 cheetahs for sale. Kenya and Ethiopia therefore concluded CoP18 Inf. 73 by stating that, far from being "limited", the illegal international trade continues to be a significant and urgent threat to wild populations of cheetahs.
12. CoP18 also adopted Decision 18.245 on the creation of a Big Cats Task Force that would focus on big cat species in Asia, Africa and Latin America, subject to prior review by the Standing Committee of its draft terms of reference, membership and *modus operandi*. Decision 18.246 mandated the Secretariat to conduct further research into trade in African lion and other big cats "to better understand trends, linkages between trade in different species, and the commodities in trade which contain, or claim to contain, such specimens".
13. CoP18 also adopted Decisions 18.56 to 18.61, on the setting up of a joint African Carnivores Initiative between CITES and the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS), which would cover African Wild Dog (*Lycaon pictus*), Cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*), Leopard (*Panthera pardus*) and Lion (*Panthera leo*).
14. The 13<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS CoP13, Gandhinagar, India, 2020) endorsed the African Carnivores Initiative by adopting [CMS Resolution 13.4](#)<sup>16</sup> which, *inter alia* tasked the initiative with developing and implementing conservation strategies for each of the four African carnivore species *which address all threats to their survival* (italics added), this last phrase being added on the recommendation of the CMS Scientific Council, and fully endorsed by the CMS Parties.
15. A recent peer-reviewed paper analysing illegal cheetah trade incidents between 2010 and 2019 identified 1,884 individual incidents involving at least 4,184 live cheetah, parts and products. The dataset includes 2,316 online advertisements involving 528 sellers and 2,298 cheetah, believed to be wild sourced. Almost 90% of these advertisements were on social media. During the last year for which data was collected (2019), 90 incidents representing 182 live cheetah were recorded, as well as 5 incidents involving skin and teeth. Of the 56 implicated countries cited in the paper, Somaliland, Kenya and Ethiopia were the range States with the highest number of incidents, while Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and UAE were the most significant of transit and destination countries. Eight Horn of Africa and Arabian Peninsula countries<sup>17</sup> represent ~95% of all identified incidents worldwide, involving over 3,800 cheetahs.<sup>18</sup> The paper also notes that fifteen of seventeen range States with National Conservation Action Plans recognise illegal trade in cheetah as a threat to country populations.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://cites.org/sites/default/files/eng/cop/18/inf/E-CoP18-Inf-073.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> <https://cites.org/sites/default/files/eng/com/sc/70/E-SC70-43.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.cms.int/sites/default/files/document/cms\\_cop13\\_res.13.4\\_cites-cms-carnivores-initiative\\_e.pdf](https://www.cms.int/sites/default/files/document/cms_cop13_res.13.4_cites-cms-carnivores-initiative_e.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, Somalia, Qatar, Ethiopia, Yemen, Kenya.

<sup>18</sup> Tricorache, P., Yashphe, S. and Marker, L. Global dataset for seized and non-intercepted illegal cheetah trade (*Acinonyx jubatus*) 2010–2019. Data in Brief 35C (2021) 106848, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dib.2021.106848>

16. Trafficking in live cheetahs has continued throughout the COVID-19 pandemic period. Between March 2020 and February 2021, a 58% increase on the previous 12 months was recorded for the Horn of Africa – Yemen trade route<sup>19</sup>.

### Recommendations

17. Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Yemen acknowledge that the Secretariat's reports to the 69<sup>th</sup> and 70<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Standing Committee, and to CoP18, have been comprehensive in terms of the Secretariat's efforts to oversee reporting on the recommendations agreed by the 66<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Standing Committee. However, during that time, sight has been lost of the implementation of these recommendations by individual range, transit and destination countries. As indicated in Document [SC70 Inf. 44](#)<sup>20</sup>, illegal trade in live cheetahs continues at an alarming rate, with significant harmful impacts on cheetah populations, particularly in East Africa.
18. Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Yemen acknowledge that in the future, several matters relating to cheetah can be addressed through the CITES Big Cats Task Force and the African Carnivores Initiative. However, there remains uncertainty over how these bodies will operate going forward, and the level of attention that will be given to the unique characteristics of the illegal trade in live cheetah, most of which is sourced from dwindling populations in the Horn of Africa and thus poses an urgent threat to severely threatened cheetah populations in the region (and is fundamentally different to the illegal trade in other big cats).
19. Accordingly, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Yemen recommend that, as a matter of urgency, the Standing Committee:
- a) Invite range, transit and destination States for illegally traded cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*) to report to the first regular meeting of the Standing Committee after CoP19 (SC77 in 2023 if all goes to plan) on their efforts to combat illegal trade in live cheetah, including ongoing implementation of the recommendations from the 66<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Standing Committee (summarised in paragraph 4 above), and those from the 70<sup>th</sup> meeting (SC70 Summary Report, summarised in paragraph 7 above) with a view to making any recommendations, including country-specific recommendations, that it deems appropriate. In particular, transit and destination States should be requested to report on efforts to combat trafficking in live cheetahs.
  - b) In the meantime, pending such reporting by range, transit and destination States, and given the urgency of the situation, which we now know is much greater than was represented in previous Committee meetings, the Committee should establish an in-session working group where affected parties can propose and discuss a strategy to combat illegal trade in cheetahs and prepare recommendations for submission to the 19<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Conference of the Parties (CoP19, Panama City, Panama, 14-25 November 2022), including recommendation on the establishment of a Working Group of the Committee at the CoP to analyse and report on recommendations on Cheetahs made in the Big Cats Task Force and report at CoP20.
  - c) Request the Secretariat to take account of the content of this document in implementing Decision 18.246, and to report to CoP19 on the discussions outlined in paragraph 17 c) above;
  - d) Ensure that the mandate and Terms of Reference for the Big Cat Task Force include a clear and specific requirement for it to consider measures which address in particular, the illegal trade in live cheetah cubs, working with range, transit and destination States as appropriate.

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<sup>19</sup> *Tricorache, P. and Stiles, D. Live Cheetahs (Black Market Brief). Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (2021).*  
<https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/live-cheetahs/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://cites.org/sites/default/files/eng/com/sc/70/Inf/E-SC70-Inf-44.pdf>