

## **CITES CoP20 Highlights: Monday, 24 November 2025**

The twentieth meeting of the Conference of the Parties (CoP20) to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES) convened in the morning in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. An opening ceremony featured a dance and video presentation that juxtaposed the beauty of nature against the dangers of its decline, highlighting the urgency of action needed in Samarkand to address illegal trade in endangered species. After opening remarks, CoP20 participants addressed administrative and procedural issues. In the afternoon, they reconvened in regional groups to prepare for the long deliberations to come in Committee I and II of the CoP.

### **Opening of the meeting**

Aziz Abdulkhakov, Advisor to the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Environment and Chairman of the National Committee on Ecology and Climate Change, welcomed CoP20 participants to Samarkand. He highlighted recent initiatives and reforms in Uzbekistan that have placed nature conservation at the top of the governmental agenda, including: 14 new protected areas; 108 species of wild fauna and flora placed under government protection; and the prevention of over 14,000 cases of wildlife crime, including illegal trade, through the adoption of integrated digital solutions and smart patrol systems. He called for productive discussions and practical collaborations at CoP20 on, *inter alia*, integrating artificial intelligence into wildlife monitoring and enforcement; helping parties update their national legislation and increase penalties for wildlife crime; and strengthening enforcement against violations.

In a video message, Inger Anderson, Executive Director, UN Environment Programme (UNEP), said that sustainable trade in wild flora and fauna can deliver for both people and the planet when it is grounded in good governance, the rule of law, and multilateral cooperation. She stressed that conservation initiatives must strengthen the prospects of communities who live with and depend on wildlife and wild resources, noting that “without protecting human well-being, no sustainable solutions can be achieved.” She further stressed the importance of synergies across environmental agreements in order to ensure the strong implementation of CITES.

Noting that CoP20 marks five decades of “tireless work” by CITES to ensure that international trade does not threaten the survival of wild plants and animals, CITES Secretary-General Ivonne Higuero expressed gratitude to the government

of Uzbekistan for hosting CoP20 in Samarkand, where “the course will be set for the Convention for the next 50 years.” She heralded CITES as “multilateralism in action,” and called for the mainstreaming of wildlife conservation in other international processes.

### **Administrative and Financial Matters**

**Election of Chair, Alternate Chair and Vice-Chairs of the meeting and of Chairs of Committees I and II:** The CoP elected Aziz Abdulkhakov (Uzbekistan) as Chair; Alisher Salomov (Uzbekistan) as Alternate Chair; Patience Gandiwa (Zimbabwe) and Ajit Karna (Nepal) as Vice Chairs; Mathias Lörtscher (Switzerland) as Chair of Committee I; Anna Wong (Singapore) as Chair of Committee II; and Abba Sonko (Senegal) as Chair of the Credentials Committee.

**Adoption of the Agenda and Working Programme:** The CoP Chair introduced the agenda (CoP20 Doc.2), which was adopted. The CoP Chair introduced the work programme (CoP20 Doc.3 Rev.1).

BRAZIL, supported by NEW ZEALAND, MEXICO, ARGENTINA, ECUADOR, and DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, requested to move agenda item 73 - Trade in endemic species (CoP20 Doc.73) from Committee II to Committee I. The US and the EU opposed. CANADA suggested that the Bureau take up the discussion on where to consider this agenda item.

The CoP adopted the work programme except agenda item 73, which will be further discussed by the Bureau.

**Rules of procedure: Proposed amendments to Rule 25.6:** SC Chair Naimah Aziz introduced the three proposed amendments to Rule of Procedure 25.6 and associated draft decision (CoP20 Doc.4) regarding the procedure for deciding on proposals for amendment of Appendices I and II that relate to the same taxon but are different in substance. The first amendment directs the Chair to advise the CoP when there are proposals that relate to the same taxon but are different in substance and allow for each of the proposals to be introduced before submission for discussion or decision. The second amendment ensures that when the adoption of one proposal implies the rejection of another proposal, the latter proposal would still be submitted to decision in relation to any remaining taxon in the latter proposal. The final amendment would establish a stepwise approach whereby if any proposal to reduce the restrictive effect on the trade in the taxon is adopted, then no further decision will be made on proposals to add restrictions on the same trade for the same taxon.

While there was consensus on the first two proposed amendments, the draft decision directing the Standing Committee

(SC) to continue discussions on the third proposed amendment regarding a stepwise approach received no consensus.

ZIMBABWE, noting their preference for the Rule to remain unchanged, said they could support the two proposed amendments but could not support the draft decision as the objective of the stepwise approach is not clear. INDONESIA recommended further discussion of this proposal. ISRAEL, supported by the US, UK, and MEXICO, said the proposed amendments represent an “excellent compromise” and called for the CoP to accept the decision so the discussion can be carried forward in the SC. SOUTH AFRICA requested that the Secretariat prepare a concise decision tree explaining how the Rule will be applied in practice and shared Zimbabwe’s concerns regarding the stepwise approach. The EU supported the proposed amendments and draft decision.

Chair Abdukhakimov proposed to adopt the rules of procedure with amendments, and postponed the adoption of the decision for the next plenary.

**Credentials Committee:** The Secretariat shared the nominations to the Committee, including representatives from Senegal, Bahrain, EU, Canada, and Papua New Guinea. The Credentials Committee was established by acclamation, with the nominee from the Central and South America and Caribbean region to be provided at a later time.

**Admission of Observers:** The Secretariat introduced CoP20 Doc.6 on the admission of observers, seeking acceptance of observers listed in the document and orally. The CoP adopted the document.

**Committee Reports and Recommendations: Standing Committee:** Chair Abdukhakimov invited the CoP to note the Report of the Chair of the SC (CoP20 Doc.12.1.1). CANADA expressed concern regarding the extensive intersessional agenda and workload of the Convention. CHINA noted that CITES must remain focused on core issues, and not lose sight of critical human dimensions in conservation. KENYA thanked former SC Chair Rosemarie Gnam for her work in chairing the African Elephant Dialogue meeting. The CoP noted the report.

**Animals Committee:** Mathias Lörtscher, Chair of the Animals Committee (AC), presented the report (CoP20 Doc.12.2.2), which includes recommendations to: adopt the amendment to Resolution Conf. 14.8 (Rev. CoP19) on Periodic Review of species included in Appendices I and II; maintain Decisions 19.211 and 19.212 on leopards (*Panthera pardus*) in Africa; and delete Decision 18.175 on captive breeding of Sri Lankan agamids.

The Secretariat noted that the work in Decision 19.211 and 19.212 could be addressed in the Memorandum of Understanding between CITES and the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS), and the Joint CITES-CMS African Carnivores Initiative.

NEW ZEALAND and the EU supported all three proposals of the AC. CHINA opposed the proposed amendment to Conf. 14.8 (Rev. COP19), noting that this may burden periodical review.

The CoP noted the report and adopted its recommendations.

**Plants Committee:** The CoP noted the report of the Plants Committee (CoP20 Doc.12.3.1), with the EU welcoming the report and commending the work of the intersessional working group.

**Enhancing the work and efficiency of the Convention through the permanent committees:** The Chair of the AC, for the Chairs of the the Standing, Plants, Animals, and Finance and

Budget committees, introduced CoP20 Doc.14, noting that the steady increase in the number of decisions considered by the CoP without a concurrent increase in capacity has led the Convention to a “breaking point.” The document’s Annex II presents a draft prioritization matrix for CITES work-directed decisions taken at a CoP. Draft decision 20.AA directs the SC to establish an intersessional working group to review and refine the prioritization matrix and make recommendations to the CoP. Draft decision 20.BB directs the Animals and Plants Committees to identify key factors within their respective mandates that could improve focus and prioritization of their efforts towards efficiency.

The Chair of the AC further clarified that, were the decision adopted, Committee Chairs would apply the prioritization matrix to decisions taken at CoP20 and the Secretariat would then notify parties and invite their views for Committee Chairs’ consideration. The matrix would then be further refined by the intersessional working group.

The Chair of the Finance and Budget Subcommittee requested further language to ensure recommendations would be for the use of the Committee Chairs. MEXICO requested that the working group consider how and by whom prioritization criteria would be applied, as well as how they would be weighted. CHINA, with BRAZIL, argued that the SC should establish the intersessional working group without additional funding. CANADA, with the EU, said that the matrix requires more refinement and should not be applied until it has been considered by parties.

BRAZIL, CANADA, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES, SINGAPORE, and others argued for the participation of parties and the SC in an intersessional working group, with the US requesting to limit membership to parties and Committee members. MEXICO, ARGENTINA, COLOMBIA, and others underlined the need for the equitable representation of parties in the intersessional working group. The Chair of the AC clarified that the working group would be open to any party. CANADA, supported by CHINA and ZIMBABWE, suggested that the issue be considered by an in-session working group.

The issue will be considered by Committee II, with the possibility of establishing an in-session working group and reconsideration by the CoP during the closing plenary.

### *In the Corridors*

CITES CoP20 opened with a rousing video and dance performance by Uzbek youth that called on delegates to take actions to live in harmony with nature because “the world is losing what it cannot replace.” Opening remarks also made clear that the expectations for CoP20 are significant as the first CoP to be held in a Central Asian country, and one that marks the 50th anniversary of CITES. As Secretary-General Higuero stressed, “the stakes could not be higher.”

While the challenges facing species continue to be significant, so is the challenge ahead for CoP20 participants. The CoP has a packed agenda including 120 documents, 350 decisions, and discussions on 250 species. While delegates sped through today’s agenda, it may be more difficult to maintain this efficiency with more controversial issues to come.

Some noted that in recent years, Samarkand has hosted several productive environment conferences. “Perhaps this streak will hold for CITES,” one observer commented, which would cement the city’s status as not only a world capital for cultural tourism, but also for multilateral environmentalism.