

**Event report: “On the way to CITES CoP20: Acknowledging CITES’ role as an international trade convention securing a sustainable management of wildlife resources”**

*25 September 2025*

On Thursday 25th of September 2025, the **MEP Group on ‘Climate Change, Biodiversity, and Sustainable Development’** hosted a high-level event at the European Parliament: [“On the Way to CITES CoP20: Acknowledging CITES’ Role as an International Trade Convention Securing the Sustainable Management of Wildlife Resources.”](#) This gathering provided a timely opportunity to reflect on the EU’s strategic objectives and to support a coherent, forward-looking approach in preparation for CoP20.

The event attracted a full audience and featured welcome and closing remarks from **MEPs César Luena, Manuela Ripa, and Michal Wiezik**, as well as an intervention from **Ms. Cristina de Avila (European Commission, DG ENV)**. Expert contributions from **TRAFFIC, CITES, FAO, EPO, UNEP**, and the **IUCN Species Survival Commission (SSC) Sustainable Use and Livelihoods Specialist Group (SULi)** offered valuable perspectives ahead of CoP20, underscoring CITES’ critical role in promoting legal and sustainable wildlife trade while highlighting the importance of strong cooperation and science-based decision-making.

Within his opening remarks, **MEP César Luena** stressed the urgency of fighting against wildlife trafficking, highlighting it as a key threat to biodiversity, security, and public health. MEP Luena underlined a few illegal trade examples, called for tougher EU rules and penalties, and presented the European Parliament’s resolution for CITES CoP20 focusing on enforcement, science-based decisions, and the need for binding legislation, expressing confidence in the EU’s leadership.

**MEP Manuela Ripa** built on the points made by MEP Luena by stressing the precarious position of wildlife and biodiversity today. Wildlife crime, she stated, is one of the most cruel and fast-growing forms of organised crime worldwide. For this reason, MEP Ripa called for a counterpart of the US Lacey Act and a positive list of permitted animals in the EU and worldwide. Furthermore, she called for adequate financial resources for public authorities enforcing CITES, increased digitalisation, and increased traceability of species. For this purpose, Ms. Ripa noted that a detailed EU information system would offer high effectiveness and lower administrative burden, simultaneously calling for stronger penalties and better enforcement.

**Mr. Ilias Grampas, managing the Secretariat of the MEP Group**, also welcomed participants and highlighted the importance of preparing the EU’s position ahead of CITES CoP20, emphasizing five priorities; setting clear strategic objectives, demonstrating credible EU leadership, ensuring science-based decisions, fostering stakeholder collaboration, and reaffirming CITES’ focus on sustainable and traceable wildlife trade.

Building on this, **Ms. Despina Symons, Director of the European Bureau for Conservation & Development (EBCD)** drew on her extensive experience with CITES to stress three key priorities; enhancing dialogue among parties to resolve divisive issues, improving national-level coherence and coordination especially across conventions, and strengthening inter-agency collaboration globally and regionally. She also underscored the importance of science-based decision-making, consultation with those who will have to implement such decisions and range states, as well as balancing conservation with local communities’ livelihoods.

Furthermore, **Ms. Karen Gaynor, Scientific Support Officer of the CITES Secretariat**, took the floor emphasizing that indeed CITES is only as strong as its implementation. She called for stronger capacity-building, enforcement, modern digital tools, and inclusive stakeholder engagement - particularly with indigenous people and local communities - while defending the role of CITES as a science-based instrument. Central points are also co-operation and partnerships, including engagement with organizations and bodies such as the FAO, the World Customs Organization, Interpol, UNODC, and the World Bank. In this context, Ms. Gaynor explained that CITES holds a unique position as a global, enforceable, and legally binding instrument.

Looking ahead, Ms. Gaynor shared her hope that CoP20 will deliver a reaffirmation of science-based decision-making, a renewed focus on capacity-building and implementation, and a commitment to adequate funding at both national and international levels. While acknowledging that CITES is primarily a trade convention - and that the wildlife trade is worth hundreds of billions of dollars annually - she stressed that CITES is equally a tool for conservation. Ultimately, it is not merely about restriction, but also about creating pathways for sustainable, regulated trade with positive conservation outcomes. She concluded: *“Let us strengthen CITES not only as a treaty but as a tool to conserve, and to foster co-operation and sustainable co-existence.”*

Building on this theme, **Ms. Nicola Okes, representing TRAFFIC**, reiterated the importance of addressing not only crime and trafficking but also legal trade. She emphasized that the well-being of indigenous people and local communities depends on the sustainable use and legal trade of wild species, both of which are jeopardized by illegal and unsustainable practices. Legal trade, therefore, must go hand-in-hand with combating illegal trafficking to safeguard biodiversity, local economies and communities.

Moreover, Ms. Okes underlined the European Union’s pivotal role as one of the world’s largest markets and trade hubs, stressing the importance of strong regulations and enforcement at EU ports, to set a global benchmark. Conversely, weaknesses in regulation and enforcement risk creating negative consequences both within and beyond EU borders. She further explained how TRAFFIC supports governments in the implementation of CITES through tools, systems, and data that provide objective evidence and guidance for policymakers.

Turning to aquatic species, **Mr. Kim Friedman, Senior Fishery Resources Officer at the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations**, focused on the management of commercially-exploited marine resources. He noted significant discrepancies in how CITES criteria are interpreted, particularly the marked differences in approval rates of CITES listing proposals. Whereas the FAO expert panel maintained a much lower approval rate, the CITES Secretariat and the IUCN/TRAFFIC panel were more favourable. These inconsistencies, Mr. Friedman argued, highlight the urgent need for a harmonized understanding of the criteria to ensure truly science-based decisions.

Moreover, he pointed out that implementation barriers continue to affect species already listed under CITES, while legal and sustainable trade in fisheries’ products is often hindered by insufficient capacity-building. To address these issues, Mr. Friedman set out the FAO’s recommendations to the EU ahead of CoP20; encourage harmonized interpretations of the CITES criteria; invest more in effective implementation; and recognize that listing species is only the first step. True effectiveness, he argued, requires awareness-raising, consultation, and sustained investment to implement CITES decisions effectively.

From the perspective of the pet sector, **Mr. Svein Fosså, President of the European Pet Organization (EPO)**, underlined the sector's commitment to responsible, sustainable trade in animals. He stressed that CITES must stay focused on its core mandate of regulating international trade in endangered species, with decisions based on science, practicality and fairness. Mr. Fosså cautioned against measures that make legal, well-regulated trade more complex, costly, or unviable, as this often inadvertently fuels illegal trafficking. In addition, he further advocated for genuine engagement with local communities and indigenous people, moving beyond consultation, to ensure that sustainable use delivers tangible benefits for both people and conservation. While supporting the EU Action Plan Against Wildlife Trafficking and CITES' role in the One Health agenda, he cautioned against duplicating other bodies' work. In addition, he stressed the need for clear terminology, enforceable rules, and transparent reporting, to facilitate compliance and strengthen conservation outcomes.

Taking a broader political perspective, **Mr. Nicolas Galudec, Senior Policy Advisor at the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Brussels Liaison Office to the European Union**, offered his reflections as well on the topic addressed. He situated CoP20 within the wider crisis of environmental multilateralism and risks of institutional deadlock within the EU, and emphasized the importance of political oversight for agreements like CITES in order to bring a new impetus to global negotiations, and to reconnect those with regional / national / local realities. He identified a number of priorities; first, environmental multilateral processes must reach beyond technical experts to the broader public and stakeholders to ensure clarity about what is at stake, by linking multilateral agreements to real-world sectors such as fisheries, the pet trade, timber, luxury goods, pharmaceuticals, and e-commerce, so their relevance and impact are more visible. Furthermore, CITES should deepen its connections with other UN agencies, scientific bodies, and related conventions (e.g. CBD, Ramsar), to avoid siloed processes, promote coherence, and tell a unified story that supports global environmental commitments, but also addresses competitiveness and resilience.

Finally, **Dr. Dan Challender, Senior Research Fellow at the University of Oxford and Member of the IUCN Species Survival Commission (SSC) Sustainable Use and Livelihoods Specialist Group (SULi)**, highlighted certain persistent challenges with regards to CITES implementation. He identified several reasons why CITES is not yet working effectively for certain species; weak legal frameworks, limited public awareness of listed species, perceived illegitimacy of implementing laws, and insufficient consultation with resource users and other key actors. Acknowledging the limited funding landscape for wildlife conservation, he warned that CITES measures can have unintended negative outcomes, particularly when socio-ecological contexts are not adequately considered.

Moreover, Dr. Challender outlined two key objectives ahead of CoP20; first, positions and decisions should be based on the best available science and information, with systematic consultation of indigenous people and local communities on listing proposals. Building on this, decision-making should move beyond purely ecological considerations, to account for broader systemic factors. These include property rights, multi-level governance, harvest incentives for local people, benefits to communities, and potential negative feedback effects. He suggested that split listings of species between appendices, allowing revised proposals for CoP21, and decision-making that allows more progress at the national level, may provide constructive solutions.

Following Dr. Challender, **Ms. Cristina de Avila (European Commission, DG ENV)** emphasized that CITES is central to the EU's biodiversity and anti-trafficking efforts. For CoP20, the EU seeks



ambitious, science-based outcomes aligned with the EU Biodiversity Strategy and the Action Plan against Wildlife Trafficking. The EU has submitted six listing proposals including for eels, sharks, and sea cucumbers, and will co-sponsor two more. Priorities include maintaining CITES' core focus on regulating international trade, strengthening enforcement and capacity-building, and recognizing the role of range states and local communities. Last but not least, Ms. de Avila highlighted the European eel as a top concern, with the EU proposing to list the entire *Anguilla* genus, while also noting the need to address CITES' growing workload to ensure effective implementation.

In his concluding remarks, **MEP Michal Wiezik** took the floor stressing that looking towards CoP20 in Uzbekistan, the EU must demonstrate strong, science-based leadership and arrive with clear strategic objectives. He emphasized that robust data, proper assessment, and above all effective implementation is essential, supported by digitalisation, adequate resources, and stronger stakeholder engagement.

MEP Wiezik also echoed earlier concerns about inconsistencies in the assessment of listing proposals, questioning how outcomes could vary so widely if all processes are based on the same data. He therefore moved on to call for greater alignment, to ensure credibility and effectiveness. Finally, he reminded participants of the urgency of addressing biodiversity loss and the "sixth mass extinction", highlighting that trade can threaten biodiversity but, if managed sustainably, can also support conservation.