

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

Thirteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties
Bangkok (Thailand), 2-14 October 2004

AGENDA ITEM 11.1 – REVIEW OF THE SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEES

1. Introduction

This document is submitted by Australia to provide further information on its proposal for a review of the scientific committees (CoP13 Doc.11.1).

Australia believes that good governance means that organisations must continually review and refocus, where necessary, their approach to business. In this context, Australia is proposing a review of the Convention's committee structure and operations.

A review of committee operation is crucial at this point in the history of the Convention, given that CITES faces a continuing shortage of funds to support its Strategic Vision. We need to ensure that we deal equitably with the competing priorities of science, regional representation, capacity building, implementation and enforcement.

Australia considers it necessary to evaluate whether the committees are operating in the most effective and efficient manner and providing useful service to all Parties. A review of expenditure is vital in order to avoid an unsustainable increase in governance and administrative costs.

There was extensive discussion at CoP12 of the permanent committee structure, and it was agreed there would be no change in the structure of permanent committees or in the number of members in each committee. We believe a new discussion is now necessary in order to seek alternate scenarios for addressing rising costs and limited budgets.

Australia has been a long-standing active participant in both committees. We have the highest regard for the valuable expertise and commitment of committee members and for the contribution the scientific committees make to the CITES decision-making process. In proposing this review, we are concerned to ensure that the committees' contribution continues in the most effective way possible to achieve conservation outcomes.

2. Reasons for a review

We need to ensure that the strategic decisions we make now are based on the best possible information. We therefore need to act now to identify future challenges and priorities, and to reorganise if necessary so that we are best placed for CITES to deliver effective species protection into the future.

Ongoing review of arrangements to ensure their effectiveness is also a critical part of good governance, consistent with the continual improvement principle.

While the committees are working well and producing helpful input to the Parties' implementation and amendment of the Convention, they have evolved over the years into large bodies in their own right. The committees cost a great deal of money, and could be considered to be diverting funds from other critical areas. The question we must ask ourselves is whether we have the balance right in managing the CITES budget to get the most efficient and robust scientific advice.

In addition to financial resources, the operation of the committees demand high levels of human resources, time and expertise; and in particular, the time of the Secretariat.

The Convention's limited financial and human resources should be divided as effectively as possible between the key activities of scientific assessment, capacity building, enforcement and implementation.

Australia is particularly concerned that scarce and vital capacity building funds are being diverted into increasingly expensive committee meetings. Capacity building in developing countries is integral to the Convention's future success in protecting species. The costs of participating in CITES, and lack of capacity to implement CITES in developing countries, is one of the major threats to CITES' effectiveness both today and into the future.

Another issue of balance that the Convention must get right in our committee work is ensuring that while the committees work on often complex and difficult species issues, they must not get too far ahead of the capacity of Parties for implementation of any resulting recommendations. In our view, it is imperative that the Convention is able to provide adequate capacity building assistance for developing countries, for example to improve capacity to make non-detriment findings, as well as continuing our strong focus on the science in the committees.

Committee costs have increased markedly in recent years, from approximately CHF50,000 in 1997 to close to CHF 90,000 in 2002. CoP12 approved annual budgets of USD 211,000 each for the operation of the Animals Committee and the Plants Committee for the years 2003-2005 inclusive.

The Animals Committee Chair reports in CoP13 Doc. 9.1.1 that for the triennium 2006-2008, the AC requires as a minimum the same support as in the previous three years so that annual meetings can take place, allowing simultaneous interpretation during its regular meetings. Taking into account the change in the way that costs for the AC are calculated in the CITES budget, the maintenance of the same level of activities by the Committee would require USD 253,865 in 2006, USD 241,754 in 2007 and 260,184 in 2008.

Similarly, in CoP13 Doc. 9.2.1, the Plants Committee Chair reports that for 2006-2008, the Plants Committee requires as a minimum the same support as in the previous three years, with figures provided by the Secretariat of USD 253,865 in 2006, USD 241,754 in 2007 and USD 260,184 in 2008. The Plants Committee Chair also states that for Plants Committee to carry out its work and accommodate costs related to activities other than the regular meetings adequately, an additional budget of USD 15,000 would be necessary.

Perhaps some aspects of the scientific committees' operation would be better handled by the Standing Committee and Conferences of the Parties: for example, budget matters and seating arrangements. While the establishment of the Standing Committee clearinghouse mechanism will go some way to addressing this, a review of the committee mandates will help to ensure that their scientific expertise is not being diverted into administrative matters.

Both the Animals and Plants Committees report that improvements are required in regional representation and communication, as well as other aspects of the committees' operations. Some of the priority problems listed in CoP13 Doc. 11.2, submitted by the Animals and Plants Committees, include:

- Continued difficulties in obtaining adequate support from Parties;
- Lack of time and insufficient means to fulfill tasks;
- Lack of response from Parties in the region;
- Lack of guidance on and understanding of the representatives' mandate and duties and how to accomplish them;
- Impossible or very difficult to find a Chair from a developing country or from countries with economies in transition because of lack of means and support;
- Difficulty in replacing members;
- Capacity of the members and their alternates to perform their duties should be reviewed;
- The contact persons list is probably overlooked or misunderstood by many Parties;
- Lack of adequate regional representation and regional communication; and
- Regional meetings are in some regions almost impossible to organize.

Although Australia supports some of the proposals put forward by the Animals and Plants Committees, Australia agrees with the Secretariat's assessment that the proposals are modest in scope and will not address the problems identified by the two committees.

If Parties do not act to address this situation, there is a real danger of a funding crisis in future years that may seriously compromise not only scientific input into CITES decision-making, but CITES operations across the board.

3. Scope of a review: what should a review cover?

Australia is open-minded about the content and possible outcomes of a review of the scientific committees. The Secretariat suggests it would be appropriate to include a review of the Nomenclature Committee in the terms of reference. Australia supports this suggestion.

The following draft terms of reference are provided for consideration. These have been further developed from the draft terms of reference suggested in the proposal in CoP13 Doc 11.1.

1. Examine and report on the current arrangements for providing scientific advice to the Convention and to the Parties, highlighting areas that could be reorganised or streamlined in a more effective or efficient manner, with particular reference to:
 - i) Mandate of the scientific committees-making sure they can focus on scientific issues;
 - ii) Structure of the scientific committees-what structure will best ensure efficient consideration of scientific issues on both flora and fauna;
 - iii) Operation of the scientific committees- what are the best possible arrangements to ensure robust science and keep costs down; and
 - iv) Efficacy of regional representation.
2. Examine and report on the resources required to support adequately the provision of scientific advice, having regard to the resources necessary to support adequately other key activities, including capacity building and enforcement. Include analysis of recent and projected expenditure trends; and
3. Examine and report on an effective process for regular review of the provision of scientific advice.