

Background Guide for The United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA)

Introduction

The United Nations Environmental Assembly is the world's highest decision-making body on the environment, that aims to address the current world's critical environmental challenges. UNEA was created in June 2012, during *the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development*, known as *RIO+20*. At the conference, world leaders called for the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to be strengthened on several fronts with action to be taken during the 67th session of the General Assembly.

The establishment of the Environment Assembly was the outcome of collective Member States' efforts, that were initiated at the *UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm* in 1972 with the goal to create a coherent system of international environmental governance. UNEA gathers ministers of environment in Nairobi, Kenya every 2 years with the first session held in 2014. The sessions are governed by *the UNEA Rules of Procedure*.

Governance, Mandate, Membership and Structure

UNEA has a universal membership of all 193 Member States. The Assembly is led by a Bureau that is composed of a President and nine assisting entities such as eight Vice-Presidents and a Rapporteur at a Ministerial-level. The Bureau is elected for a period of two years. According to UNEA mandates, it is the responsibility of the President to organize and gather all official plenary meetings, the Committee of the Whole, as well as the working groups dedicated to resolutions clusters.

The Assembly has an inter-sessional intergovernmental body, known as the Committee of Permanent Representatives, established as a subsidiary organ of the Governing Council in May 1985. The Governing Council's decision *19/32* defines that the Committee consists of all Member States representatives, members of its specialized agencies, the European Union (EU). The Committee plays a role in formulating the agenda for the UN Environment Assembly and also offers guidance to the Assembly on policy issues, prepares decisions for adoption by the Assembly, and oversees the implementation of those decisions.

UNEA holds Side Events, that are unofficial events that take place at UNON convened by Member States or UN entities. Civil Society can hold side events only in collaboration with a Member State or the UN entity. UNEA also hold Associated Events, which are unofficial events, that take place out of the *UNON Gigiri Complex* and is convened by other UNEP stakeholders, including Civil Society. These events do not have to be held in collaboration with either Member State or a UN entity.

There are three main sources of funding for UNEP. It receives funds from the UN Regular Budget, that is the only regular source of funding and accounts for 5% annually. Another 15% of annual funds comes from Environment Fund, which is the core fund of UNEP that provides crucial support for the necessary capabilities required to ensure the well-balanced and effective implementation of UNEP's approved program of work. Around 80% of contributions are called

Earmarked Contributions, that are earmarked for specific countries or projects and consists of Earmarked Funds and Global Funds (GEF and GCF).

Topic: Preventing the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora

Background

Illegal wildlife trade (IWT) encompasses all fauna and flora. "Fauna" refers to animals, birds, and fish. "Flora" includes plants, including both timber and non-timber forest products. IWT is considered a criminal activity that involves actions contrary to national laws and regulations designed to safeguard natural resources and manage their utilization. Tackling international trade of endangered species helps address the SDGs 14 *Life Below Water* and 15 *Life on Land* that is devoted to "protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss".¹ Endangered species are crucial for biodiversity and ecosystem balance. International trade can lead to rapid population declines, disrupting ecosystems and ecological services like pollination and pest control. Preventing this trade is vital for safeguarding biodiversity, maintaining balance, and ensuring a sustainable future.

UNEP administers *The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)* which is a global treaty designed to safeguard wild animals and plants from the threat of extinction resulting from international trade. The Convention achieves this goal by overseeing the trade of more than 38,000 species listed in its three Appendices. From 2011 to 2020, exporters reported approximately 3.5 million shipments under CITES. These shipments involved a staggering total of over 1.3 billion individual organisms, comprising 1.26 billion plants and 82 million animals. The trade encompassed a little over 12,000 species, which accounted for 58% of the listed animal species and 28% of the plant species listed in CITES.² *The Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS)* is a UN Environment treaty established in 1979. It serves as the sole international platform dedicated to the conservation of migratory species.

The Rio+20 outcome document *The Future We Want* (UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/66/288) emphasizes the significance of the impacts of IWT on society, economies, and the environment. These impacts are explicitly addressed through the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The World Wildlife Trade Report, authored by wildlife trade experts at UNEP-WCMC, examines trade volumes comprehensively, presents insights into the conservation and socio-economic impacts of legal wildlife trade, and investigates connections between illegal and legal trade.

Climate Change

¹ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Biodiversity and Ecosystems. Goal 15.

² The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. World Wildlife Trade Report. 2022.

By decreasing and adversely affecting wildlife populations, IWT poses a significant threat to related natural processes, including those that influence the climate. Current negative tendencies in biodiversity and ecosystems will diminish progress towards 80% the achievement of the SDGs, including the *SDG 13 Climate Action*.³ It can impose threats to local ecosystem and put all the species under additional pressure in the context of ongoing pollution, deforestation, and other forms of habitat destruction.

The Paris Agreement, adopted in 2015 under *the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)*, indirectly contributes to the protection of biodiversity. While the agreement's primary focus is on reducing greenhouse gas emissions and limiting global warming, The Agreement's global recognition and efforts to tackle climate change raise awareness about the interconnection between climate change and biodiversity loss.

In 2014, the *UNEA Resolution 1/3* stated that IWT "contributes to damage to ecosystems and rural livelihoods, undermines good governance and the rule of law and threatens national security and has a negative impact on sustainable utilization, including ecotourism and wildlife-based tourism". It outlines particular recommendations, including resource mobilization and community development, which Member States can adopt to combat IWT. In 2004, UNEP launched *The Green Customs Initiative*, which is a partnership between international organizations working together to prevent illegal trade in environmentally-sensitive commodities through monitoring and facilitating legal trade while detecting and preventing the illicit trade of environmentally sensitive goods covered by relevant multilateral environmental agreements.

Capacity building and knowledge-sharing

For species listed under CITES Appendix II, which comprises species not necessarily facing extinction but potentially threatened by international commercial trade, it was assumed that 25% of the market is illegal.⁴ This assumption stems from the lack of dependable data and established methodologies allowing for meaningful comparisons across species and geographic regions.

It is crucial to develop capacity building and develop knowledge-sharing database to identify potential risks and suspicious activities related to illegal wildlife trade. Capacity building in research and monitoring techniques allows for better understanding of species populations and trade dynamics. Sharing this scientific knowledge can inform evidence-based policies and conservation strategies. Together with other UN bodies, such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNEP holds the campaign *Wild for Life* that collaborates with famous influencers that reach the audience up to 1 billion people. Through this collaborations, the campaign aims to raise public awareness on the implications of the illegal trade in wildlife, as well as to understand possible environmental and economic impacts of the illegal trade. UNEP established *World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC)* that serves as a worldwide hub of expertise and research on biodiversity and the valuable role of nature in society and the economy.

³ United Nations Convention on Climate Change. *Climate Change Is a Key Driver for Species Extinction*. 2019.

⁴ World Bank. *Illegal Logging, Fishing, and Wildlife Trade: the Costs and How to Combat It*. 2019.

Supported by UNEP, CITES chairs the *International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime (ICCWC)*, that fosters a robust international collaboration to combat wildlife crime, including illegal logging. A joint project CITES and UNEP-WCMC, *CITES Wildlife TradeView* serves as a user-friendly platform, offering insights into CITES trade data. It showcases key information on trading countries, species, commodities, sources, and trends over time, providing a comprehensive view of the world of CITES trade data.

State-Legislations and Enforcement Mechanisms.

Governments lose \$7-12 billion annually in potential revenues due to illegal logging, fishing, and wildlife trade, including endangered species⁵. This loss hampers economic growth and poses development risks beyond national borders. Insufficient investments and lack of coordinated action at local, national, and global levels will result in the exploitation of natural resources, jeopardizing economic growth and social stability in less developed nations.

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) is the most comprehensive binding international agreement in the field of nature conservation and the sustainable use of natural resources, that encourages member countries to develop measures including the establishment of legal frameworks and enforcement mechanisms to prevent illegal wildlife trade. CITES provides an automated information exchange system, known as *eCITES*, to enhance the regulation of international trade in endangered species. This system aims to assist government agencies in more effectively targeting inspections and identifying individuals involved in illegal wildlife trade.

UNEP launched the *Project Addressing the Illicit Trade in Wildlife and Forest Products* that supported the global reduction of illicit trade in wildlife and forest products through helping countries strengthen their legal frameworks and implementation capacities, while promoting the exchange of information on IWT.

Conclusion

In conclusion, addressing the prevention of the international trade in endangered species of wild fauna and flora is an urgent and multifaceted challenge that requires global cooperation and commitment. Prioritizing capacity building initiatives and knowledge sharing among nations will empower local law enforcement and border control officers to effectively combat illegal wildlife trade, preserving our invaluable natural heritage for generations to come.

CITES plays a pivotal role in addressing the prevention of international trade in endangered species. As an essential tool in conservation efforts, CITES ensures that trade in endangered species is regulated, mitigating the threats posed by illegal wildlife trafficking. This committee's work aligns directly with SDGs 14 and 15. SDG 14 focuses on conserving and sustainably using marine resources, while SDG 15 aims to protect the sustainable use of land ecosystems. By working collaboratively and taking decisive actions, UNEA can make significant strides in protecting our planet's vulnerable species and fostering a sustainable future for all.

Questions to consider:

⁵ Ibid.

1. What is the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), and what is its primary objective? What are the CITES' Appendices?
2. What is IWT? How does UNEP address the endangered wildlife crime?
3. How does illegal wildlife trade (IWT) impact biodiversity and ecosystem balance?
4. How does the prevention of international trade in endangered species align with SDGs 14 and 15?
5. How can capacity building and knowledge sharing initiatives help in the fight against illegal wildlife trade?

Helpful links:

1. <https://www.unep.org/environmentassembly/>
2. <https://cites.org/eng>
3. <https://cites.org/sites/default/files/documents/E-CoP19-Inf-24.pdf>
4. https://cites.org/eng/new_wildlife_data_visualisation_platform_reveals_trends_international_trade_endangered_species_09032022
5. https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/wildlife/2020/World_Wildlife_Report_2020_9July.pdf
6. <https://cites.org/sites/default/files/documents/E-Annual%20Report%202020-2021.pdf>
7. <https://maps.worldbank.org/projects>
8. https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/wildlife/Illegal_wildlife_trade_and_climate_change_2022.pdf

Regional Organizations:

African Union-
<https://www.au.int/>

Arab League-
<http://www.arableagueonline.org/>

Association of South East Asian Nations-
<http://asean.org/>

Asian Cooperation Dialogue-
<http://www.acd-dialogue.org/>

European Union-
https://europa.eu/european-union/index_en

Economic Community of West African States-
<http://www.ecowas.int/>

Organization of American States-
<http://www.oas.org/en/>

Pacific Islands Forum-
<http://www.forumsec.org/>

Union of South American Nations-
<http://www.unasur.int/en>

International Agencies

Europol-
<https://www.europol.europa.eu/>

International Police Association-
<http://www.ipa.-jac.org/>

INTERPOL -
<https://www.interpol.int/>

International Criminal Court-
<https://www.icc-cpi.int/>

United Nations Entities

International Peace and Security-
<http://www.un.org/en/sections/priorities/international-peace-and-security/>

Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
<https://www.unocha.org/>