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Thanks to Namibia for cheetahs? India abstains on ivory trade vote

Under cheetah deal, Namibia sought India's support to lift ban

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For the first time since joining the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Flora and Fauna (CITES) in 1976, India did not vote against a proposal seeking to re-open the ivory trade.

That proposal, to allow a regular form of controlled trade in ivory from Namibia, Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwe, was defeated 83-15 at the 19th meeting of the CITES Conference of the Parties (CoP19) in Panama City Friday evening.

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India's abstention — a break from its past stand — was in tune with what Namibia had asked for when it agreed to transfer cheetahs this summer.

Under that agreement signed in July, first reported by [The Indian Express](#) on October 12, the two countries committed to promoting “sustainable utilisation and management of biodiversity” by supporting each other “at international forums including meetings” of the CITES.

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While the word “ivory” was not mentioned, Namibia sought India’s backing, under the commitment to support “sustainable management” at CITES, for its longstanding proposal to allow trade in ivory.

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Indeed, it said as much. “We have approached India to support us in this regard as per the provision of the agreement,” Romeo Muyunda, chief public relations officer of Namibia’s Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism, told The Indian Express last month.

Reacting to the report, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change had said that the “Government of India has not received any written communication from the Republic of Namibia regarding lifting of ban on ivory trade”.

Asked Saturday why India abstained from voting and if this was a policy shift, Chandra Prakash Goyal, Director General of Forests in the Environment Ministry, said he was not aware of the circumstances in which the voting took place. “What is important is that the (ivory trade) proposal was defeated,” he said.

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Contacted Saturday, Muyunda declined to comment.

For over three decades, India has opposed the international ivory trade. In fact, India designed the iconic CITES logo in the form of an elephant way back in 1981. The ivory trade was globally banned in 1989 when all African elephant populations

were put in CITES Appendix I. The populations of Namibia, Botswana and Zimbabwe were transferred to Appendix II in 1997 and South Africa's in 2000. No trade is allowed in species listed in CITES Appendix I while trade is strictly regulated in those under Appendix II.

In 1999 and 2008, Namibia, along with Zimbabwe and, later, Botswana and South Africa, was permitted by CITES to conduct one-off sales of ivory stockpiled from natural elephant deaths and seizures from poachers.

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Subsequently, Namibia's proposal for allowing a regular form of controlled trade in ivory by delisting the elephant populations of the four countries from CITES Appendix II was rejected at the CoP17 (2016) and CoP18 (2019). At CoP19, the proposal was moved by Zimbabwe but met the same fate yet again.

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While Kenya, Congo, the European Union, the UK, the USA, Israel, UAE, Australia and Argentina were among those who voted against the proposal, Tanzania, Zambia, Japan, China and Thailand were some of the supporting members. Those who abstained included Uganda, Brazil, Mexico and Indonesia.

Namibia and other southern African countries argue that their elephant populations have bounced back and that their stockpiled ivory, if sold internationally, can generate much-needed revenue for elephant conservation and incentivizing communities.

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Opponents of the ivory trade counter that any form of supply stokes demand and that sharp spikes in elephant poaching were recorded across the globe after one-off sales were allowed by the CITES in 1999 and 2008.

Incidentally, at the same CoP19 Thursday, Namibia voted against India's proposal to allow sustainable commercial use of North Indian rosewood — *Dalbergia sissoo* — which was defeated 55-30.

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The first batch of cheetahs was flown in from Namibia on September 17. Three of eight animals have already been moved from the quarantine areas to larger enclosures in Madhya Pradesh's Kuno National Park where two have started making kills.

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