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Protect the Integrity of CITES: Lessons From Japan's IWC Withdrawal to Keep Polarization From Tearing CITES Apart

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ABSTRACT

Unsustainable wildlife trade is a major driver of global biodiversity loss. Effective wildlife trade governance is critical for conservation and requires international cooperation and coordination to regulate an industry valued at hundreds of billions of dollars a year. Yet, due to increasing polarization over consumptive wildlife use, certain countries have become disenfranchised by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), the primary mechanism for regulating international wildlife trade. Tensions within CITES are rising over the elephant ivory and rhino horn trade, where polarization has pushed ten Southern African Development Community countries to suggest an outright withdrawal from CITES. The denunciation of CITES by such a large and ecologically significant bloc would substantially weaken the integrity, credibility, and stature of the Convention. There is a contemporary precedent to reference: Japan left the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in 2019 due to polarization over commercial whaling. Here, we examine the common threads between these two cases: changing organizational ethos, polarization amongst members, influence of non-state actors, and loss of decidability for dissenting nations. Taking critical lessons from Japan's IWC withdrawal, we propose various options for structural reforms in CITES to restore decidability, enable equitability, and implement inclusive decision-making.

TABLE 1 | Key terms used in this paper and their definitions.

Term	Definition
CITES	Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora
Parties to CITES	States or regional economic integration organizations that have joined CITES
Conference of the Parties (CoP) to CITES	The highest decision-making body of CITES, comprising its parties; the CoP meets triennially to review the implementation of the Convention
IWC	International Whaling Commission
IWC member	Countries that formally adhere to the 1946 International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling and are represented at the IWC by a commissioner who is nominated by their government
Decidability	A concept in management studies that describes the possibility for actors to reach collective decisions about changes to an existing social order within the mandate of an organized collective
Values	Individual or collective beliefs that motivate people or groups to act or behave in a certain way
Social equity	The fair or just treatment of individuals or groups across procedural, distributional, recognitional, and contextual dimensions
Inclusive decision-making	An approach to the process of making decisions that actively involves all stakeholders who would be directly affected by the decision outcome

1 | Introduction

Unsustainable wildlife harvest and trade is a significant driver of global biodiversity loss (Cardoso et al. 2021; Challender et al. 2022; Jaureguiberry et al. 2022). While estimates vary, legal wildlife trade is valued in the hundreds of billions of dollars a year, with illegal trade occurring in parallel ('t Sas-Rolfes et al. 2019; Andersson et al. 2021). The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) is the primary mechanism for regulating international wildlife trade (see Table 1 for key terms and definitions). CITES entered into force in 1975 following recognition by countries and international organizations of the need for collective governance to avoid the overexploitation of wildlife (Boardman 1981). CITES brings together 184 countries and the European Union to establish trade controls for species, set policy directions, and review the implementation of the Convention ('t Sas-Rolfes et al. 2019; Hutchinson et al. 2022).

The fates of more than 40,000 species depend, sometimes in large part, on effective CITES implementation. CITES has been critical in averting the extinction of species, including the saltwater crocodile (CITES 2019), vicuña (McAllister et al. 2009), and jaguar (Mena et al. 2021). However, polarization over the trade of certain charismatic megafauna can dominate meetings, leaving little time and energy for other threatened taxa, and now threatens to tear CITES apart (Biggs, Holden, et al. 2017; Challender, Hinsley, et al. 2019). During the 18th Conference of the Parties (CoP) in 2019, ten Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries—Botswana, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eswatini, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe—announced that they would be reconsidering their CITES membership (SUCo-SA 2022), which was reiterated ahead of CoP19 in 2022 (Harris 2022; Thobega 2022). In May 2024, leaders at the first heads of state summit for the Kavango-Zambezi Trans-Frontier Conservation Area (KAZA TFCA), which brings Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe together to manage the Kavango-Zambezi ecosystem, further discussed withdrawal from CITES in the context of benefiting from sustainable wildlife trade (KAZA 2024). The denunciation of CITES by any member state would arguably weaken global wildlife trade governance and complicate conservation efforts and law enforcement. Indeed, withdrawals from multilateral agreements may pose the risk of a domino effect, with other parties subsequently withdrawing (Walter 2021).

At the heart of this dispute is whether commercial trade in elephant ivory and rhino horn should, and under what conditions, be permitted (Biggs, Holden, et al. 2017; Cheung et al. 2021a). This issue is critical as the large-scale, historical trade in these products had significant, sometimes near-extinction-level, consequences on these species in some parts of Africa (Bouché et al. 2011; Chase et al. 2016; Moodley et al. 2017). Although the ten SADC countries are home to 83% of African elephants (*Loxodonta Africana* and *Loxodonta cyclotis*), 85% of black rhinos (*Diceros bicornis*), and 97% of white rhinos (*Ceratotherium simum*) (Emslie et al. 2016; IUCN SSC African Elephant Specialist Group 2023) populations, proposals to allow or restrict commercial international trade are voted on equally by all CITES parties. Several proposals to permit international trade in rhino horn and elephant ivory—under which revenue would fund conservation efforts and support community development (Biggs et al. 2013)—were tabled by various SADC countries in 2016, 2019, and 2022, but all were rejected by voting. Similar proposals that have been rejected date back to the 1990s (CITES 1994).

The withdrawal of all or some of the members of such a large and ecologically significant bloc would substantially weaken the integrity, credibility, and stature of CITES. It would hinder multilateral cooperation in policymaking, law enforcement, wildlife monitoring, and research, and damage the universality and legitimacy of the Convention. It would also set a precedent

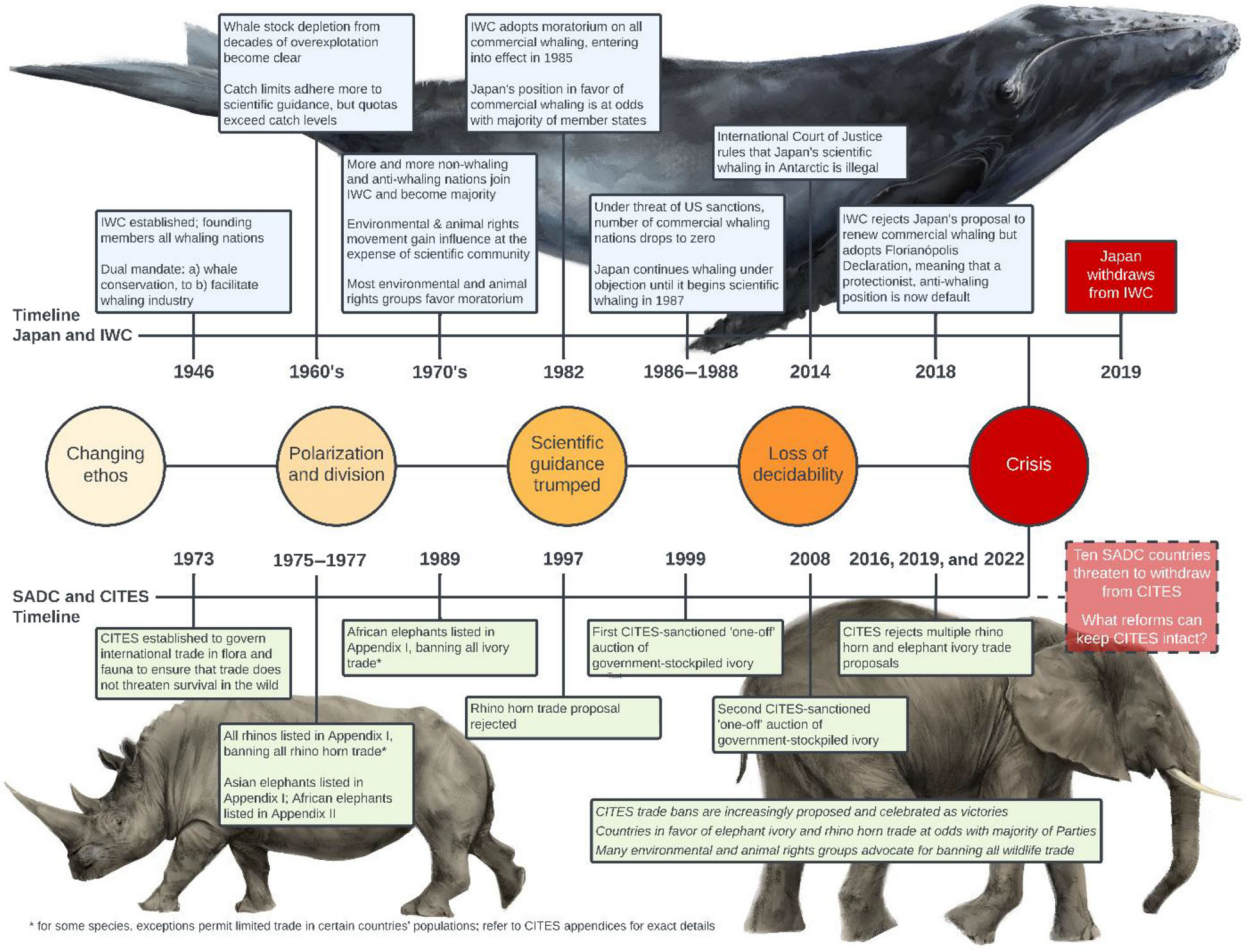

FIGURE 1 | Timeline of events creating four common threads between Japan's withdrawal from the IWC and the ten SADC countries' suggested withdrawal from CITES: changing organizational ethos, polarization amongst members creating contradictory social orders, influence of non-state actors trumping scientific guidance, and loss of decidability for dissenting nations that causes disenfranchisement. Wildlife illustrations in this figure were contributed by Lalain Iqbal Khan (Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University).

within CITES for other dissenting countries to withdraw (Pastene 2019; Sælen et al. 2020; Zhang et al. 2017). Furthermore, should such withdrawals occur, trade in elephant ivory and rhino horn could commence, including with countries still party to CITES, but possibly without the same level of checks and balances that have been in place for decades. Non-parties are still expected to provide evidence akin to non-detriment findings and legal acquisition findings.

Suggestions of withdrawal from international conventions must be taken seriously. This was demonstrated by Japan's withdrawal from the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in 2019, which set a contemporary precedent for countries to withdraw from major global environmental treaties because of polarized positions on consumptive wildlife use (Normile 2019). We argue that the commonalities between the lead-up to Japan's IWC withdrawal and the tensions between CITES and the ten SADC countries are concerning (Figure 1). While there are clear differences between the two cases, from the number of states withdrawing to whether the lethal harvest is involved (see Section 3), critical lessons can be learned from Japan's IWC withdrawal, which, if applied, could prevent the current internal polarization from potentially damaging CITES irreversibly. These include structural changes that could improve the effectiveness, responsiveness, equitability, and robustness of CITES (Bennett and Satterfield 2018).

2 | Japan's IWC Withdrawal

There are complex historical, cultural, and political aspects to both whaling in Japan and why Japan left the IWC in 2019 (Shi 2018). The IWC was formed in 1946 (Japan joined in 1951), and each of its 15 founding member states had significant whaling interests and industries. These countries' whaling interests were reflected in the IWC's dual mandate to "provide for the proper conservation of whale stocks and thus make possible the orderly development of the whaling industry." However, IWC membership rose rapidly in the following decades, and the number of member states with no whaling interests and which held anti-whaling stances grew to become the majority (Nishikawa 2020).

The depletion of whale stocks from decades of overexploitation meant that most countries had lost interest in large-scale whaling by the 1970s, particularly in previously lucrative Antarctic waters

(Skodvin and Andresen 2003). During this period, environmental and animal rights groups became increasingly influential in the IWC at the expense of the scientific community, including the IWC's Scientific Committee (Skodvin and Andresen 2003). The United States, one of the IWC's founding and most influential members, came under mounting domestic political pressure to transition away from whaling, especially from these groups. After adopting an anti-whaling position, the United States began to pressure other member states to move in that direction, including with the threat of economic sanctions (Skodvin and Andresen 2003).

In 1982, the changing dynamics within the IWC culminated in the adoption of a moratorium on all commercial whaling (Cheung et al. 2024; Nishikawa 2020; Skodvin and Andresen 2006). The moratorium remains in place today, with environmental and animal rights groups maintaining opposition to whaling activities. This is despite the IWC Scientific Committee's assessment that certain species, notably common minke whales (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*), are abundant and that a global moratorium on the commercial whaling of all species is neither necessary nor scientifically warranted (Skodvin and Andresen 2003). While considerable uncertainties persist with regards to population estimates and the ecology of common minke whales and other cetacean species (Risch et al. 2019), objections to a blanket moratorium on scientific grounds stretch back to its enactment (Andresen 1989). After the moratorium was instituted, Japan controversially continued to hunt whales in the Antarctic under the IWC's scientific research exemption, which allows governments to issue special permits to authorize research that involves killing or taking whales (Baker et al. 2000; Strausz 2014; Triggs 2000). In 2014, the International Court of Justice determined Japan's scientific whaling program to, in fact, be commercial in nature and thus in violation of international law (Mangel 2016; Nussbaum Wichert and Nussbaum 2017). Nevertheless, Japan continued to catch between 488 and 640 whales a year from 2015 to 2018 through special permits for scientific research (International Whaling Commission 2024).

Although the IWC's mission remains officially unchanged, it has, in reality, been repurposed into a de facto protectionist, anti-whaling organization (Sigvaldsson 1996; Skodvin and Andresen 2003). In 2018, the IWC rejected Japan's proposal to renew commercial whaling and concurrently adopted the Florianópolis Declaration to state that its role in the 21st century is "to ensure the recovery of cetacean populations to their preindustrial levels, and in this context [reaffirm] the importance of maintaining the moratorium on commercial whaling" (International Whaling Commission 2018). At IWC meetings, member states can each exercise one equal vote on policy proposals. Major decisions (e.g., ending the whaling moratorium) require a two-thirds majority, while minor decisions (e.g., introducing an additional working language) require a simple majority (CITES 2022c; Dippel 2015). Member states are not required to vote in accordance with the policy advice and recommendations of the Scientific Committee, which is itself not immune to internal politicization and polarization (Morishita and Goodman 2005).

Within this voting structure, nations with active and direct interests in commercial whaling represent a minority, outnumbered by a large majority of anti-whaling members. As there is an entrenched voting majority, the minority's voice and interests are unable to meaningfully impact outcomes; whaling states have lost decidability and are, in practice, unable to meaningfully influence the present direction of international whaling policy. Decidability is a concept in management studies that describes the possibility for actors to reach collective decisions about changes to an existing social order within the mandate of an organized collective (Berkowitz, Brusson, et al. 2022; Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer 2022). Coupled with a loss of perceived legitimacy from the de facto shift in organizational ethos away from governing the sustainable use of natural resources towards a protectionist or animal rights agenda, the loss of decidability can cause disenfranchisement, disengagement, and ultimately governance failure (Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer 2022; Fisher and Green 2004). Japan's withdrawal from the IWC in 2019 was as much about whaling as it was about the principles of self-determination, adhering to the spirit of legally binding international agreements, and evidence-based policymaking in natural resource management (Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer 2022; Danaher 2002; Nishikawa 2020).

Since withdrawing from the IWC, Japan has resumed commercial whaling in its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) for domestic consumption, harvesting between 256 and 307 whales per year (around half its catch in the final years of its scientific whaling program) (Wakamatsu et al. 2022). Japan remains an active nonmember government observer to the IWC, reports catch data voluntarily, and continues to advocate strongly for ending the moratorium (Gales 2022). Although these developments may appear on the surface as business as usual, we believe that Japan's withdrawal from the IWC has important conservation implications in that it pares back official cooperation and damages the legitimacy of a major intergovernmental organization in global environmental governance (Sælen et al. 2020) and exposes the limits of normative practices like shaming in international relations on environmental matters (Kolmaš 2021). While Japan is a stable democracy with a strong rule of law and low levels of corruption, the withdrawal of other countries without similar characteristics from international conventions may have further consequences for biodiversity conservation (Rydén et al. 2020).

3 | The Parallel With CITES and SADC Countries

Four key contributing factors to Japan's withdrawal from the IWC are worryingly consistent with the current standoff between CITES and the ten SADC countries:

1. changing organizational ethos,
2. polarization amongst members creating contradictory social orders,
3. influence of non-state actors trumping scientific guidance, and
4. loss of decidability for dissenting nations that causes disenfranchisement (Figure 1).

CITES is the primary instrument for safeguarding wild plants and animals from overexploitation for international trade ('t Sas-Rolfes et al. 2019; Cooney et al. 2021). Species listed in the treaty's

three Appendices are subject to different levels of trade controls: Appendix I bans all commercial international trade, Appendix II requires international trade to be closely regulated and subject to sustainability assessments, and Appendix III lists species protected in at least one country that requests international assistance in managing trade. Currently, listing decisions are made on the basis of biological and trade criteria only (CITES 2016) and do not, by default, consider broader socioecological outcomes (Cooney et al. 2021). For instance, the listing of all pangolins (*Manidae* spp.) on Appendix I in 2016 has not had any demonstrable effect on reducing illegal trade levels (Nijman 2023). Proposals to apply, amend, or remove trade controls are voted on by parties in a voting system similar to that in the IWC. Each country gets one vote regardless of their responsibility towards or interest in a particular species. Votes on substantive issues like listing species in the Appendices and major regulatory changes require a two-thirds majority to be adopted (Figure 2). There are also North–South dynamics at play in CITES, with the United States and European Union holding disproportionate influence over proceedings and decisions (Cooney and Jepson 2006; Duffy 2013; Roe 2006).

Where CITES members are strongly polarized, disenfranchisement can result when states with direct interests in the management and benefit flows of a given species find themselves in a voting minority and thus unable to meaningfully affect decisions (Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer 2022; Gehring and Ruffing 2008; Weber et al. 2015). This loss of decidability is exacerbated by a general trend in which trade bans are perversely celebrated as conservation victories by some actors regardless of practical biodiversity outcomes (Challender, Hinsley, et al. 2019; Challender and MacMillan 2019), including many environmental and animal rights groups that have become influential in issue framing, agenda setting, voting choices, and final listing decisions (‘t Sas-Rolfes and Gooden 2024; Challender and MacMillan 2019). For instance, the United States. first proposed uplisting polar bears (*Ursus maritimus*) from Appendix II to Appendix I at CoP15 in 2010, complementing this domestically by protecting the species under the Endangered Species Act. This change in domestic regulation has had negative conservation outcomes overall: no decline in overall harvest, reduced US hunter participation, which has impacted the livelihoods of Arctic indigenous communities, reduced tolerance for wildlife, and reduced participation in shared management initiatives for this species (Weber et al. 2015). Yet, influential groups have continued to advocate for transferring the polar bear to CITES Appendix I, which would compound these impacts (Sellheim 2019).

We note that there are also differences between the two cases. For instance, the ten SADC countries represent a bloc in CITES, whereas Japan acts as a single state in the IWC. The Japanese whaling industry supplies domestic as opposed to overseas demand, as is primarily the case with the rhino horn and elephant ivory markets (Cheung et al. 2021b; Miao et al. 2022). Whaling necessarily involves lethal means of harvest, whereas rhinos can be dehorned without lethal means, and stockpiles of ivory and rhino horn exist (Gjerdseth 2025; Pfannerstill et al. 2023). Furthermore, withdrawing from CITES would be complicated given that trade between parties and non-parties is able to continue under current regulations (Challender et al. 2015; CITES 2022b). Despite these differences, the four common threads identified here represent considerable overlap in intraorganizational dynamics, and critical lessons learned from Japan’s IWC withdrawal can be used to inform and shape reforms that could strengthen CITES.

4 | Reforms to Protect CITES’s Integrity

Understanding and cooperation between nations are critical for global environmental governance to function effectively, especially because membership in multilateral agreements is voluntary. When countries on the majority side of contentious issues repeatedly dismiss the concerns and interests of dissenting nations, the resulting deadlock can lead to a collapse in trust and cooperation. Such erosion of decidability can lead to institutional failure in global governance, as exemplified by Japan’s withdrawal from the IWC (Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer 2022). The integrity of CITES would be damaged should the ten SADC countries—or a subset of them—withdraw. Greater consideration of the socioeconomic factors and development needs of states and key stakeholders with direct interests in contentious wildlife commodities in listing decisions would improve the effectiveness and sustainability of wildlife trade governance (Cooney et al. 2021). Challender et al. (2025) recommend amending Annex 6 of Res. Conf. 9.24 (*Format for proposals to amend the Appendices*) to include social and economic factors, which could incentivize parties to consider these factors in listing proposals. Recent research has also demonstrated the need for CITES to be flexible and adaptive if it is to contribute to conservation most effectively, especially for African megafauna (‘t Sas-Rolfes, Challender, et al. 2024). We propose three main streams of reform to help CITES stay intact while being flexible to deliver sustainable conservation outcomes:

a. increase the acceptability of reservations and restore decidability through voting reforms,
b. enable social equity by adopting formal processes that explicitly incorporate stakeholder values and circumstances, and
c. embrace inclusive decision-making.

4.1 | Restore Decidability: Ensuring Nations With Direct Interests Have a Meaningful Say in Their Natural Resource Use

Current CITES rules of procedure grant each party an equal vote on decisions at meetings. Parties can give written notice to unilaterally opt out of being bound by provisions relating to trade in particular species. The rules permit parties to enter reservations either on joining the Convention or within 90 days of an amendment to the appendices being adopted (i.e., a change to trade controls for species). While reservations are used, they are sometimes not used for their intended purpose and are largely ineffectual because trade between parties involving species subject to reservations still requires similar standards to be upheld and comparable documentation to be produced (Challender et al. 2015; CITES 2022b).

CITES listing decisions apply to species as a whole. While individual populations of a species can be placed in separate appendices

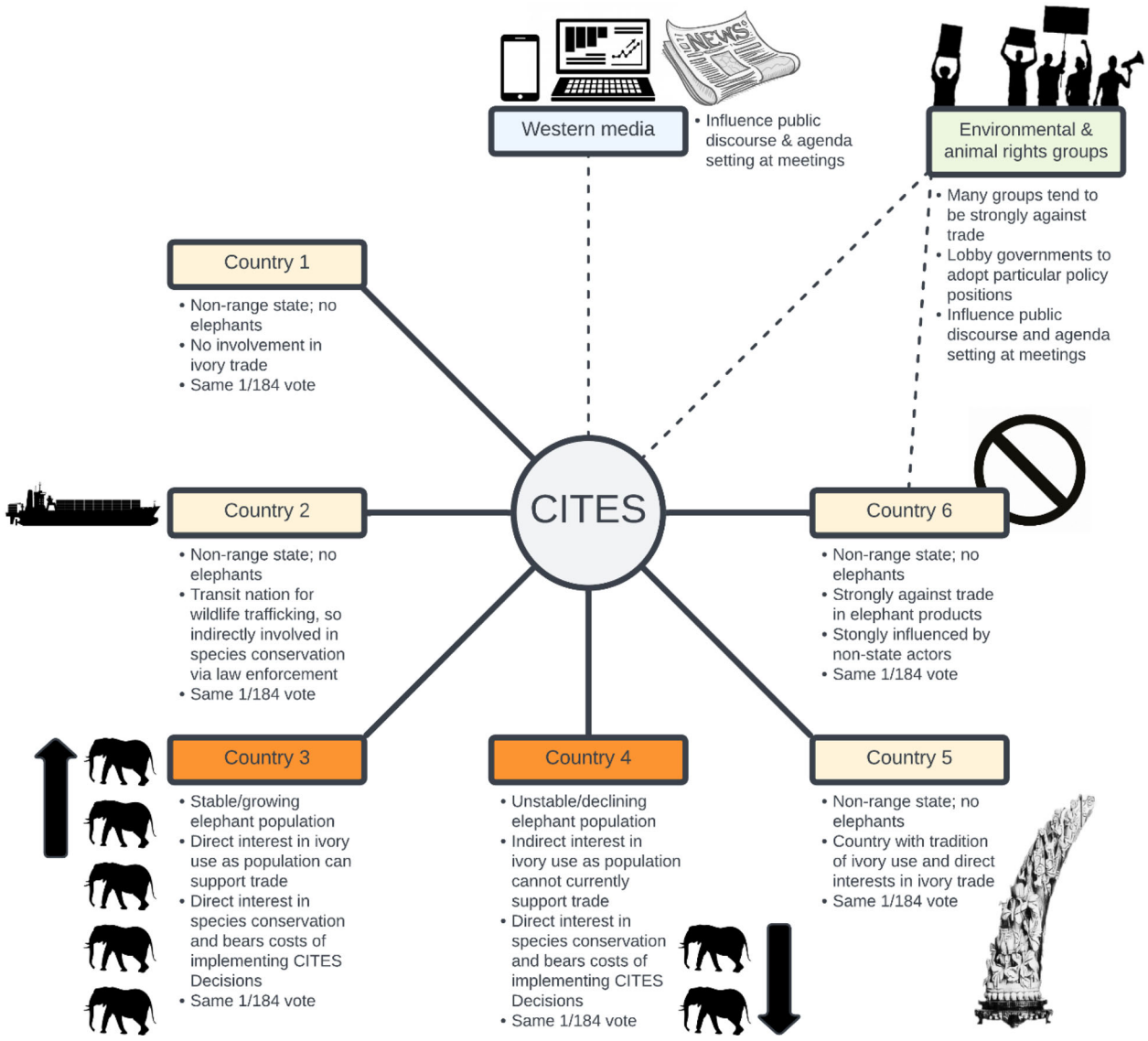

FIGURE 2 | Under the current CITES voting mechanism, every party is entitled to exercise the same, equally weighted vote on decisions, including decisions to amend the Appendices, regardless of the member state's interests (or lack thereof) in particular species. In the case of the African elephant, Botswana (home to one-third of the species' global population) has the same voting power as a country on a different continent with no direct role in the management or conservation of the species. This graphic illustrates how six hypothetical CITES parties with differing interests in African elephant use and conservation all have the same, equally weighted vote—one for each of the 185 parties to CITES (solid lines). Non-state actors can exert influence over policymaking indirectly (dotted lines). States lose decidability when they can no longer meaningfully influence collective decisions about changes to an existing social order within the mandate of an organized collective. Disenfranchisement can ensue, especially when coupled with the trend in which CITES trade bans are perversely celebrated as conservation victories by some actors regardless of practical biodiversity outcomes.

through "split-listings," this is uncommon, cumbersome, and discouraged (Cooney et al. 2021), even though it has been effective for several species (Challender et al. 2025). Improving the way reservations are used could make it easier for parties to deploy management strategies that are most appropriate for the local socioecological context and thus help achieve the objective of ensuring that exploitation for international trade does not threaten species survival (IPBES 2022). One way to do this would be for the parties to amend Resolution 4.25 (Rev. CoP19) on reservations to create a policy environment where the use of reservations is more acceptable and more meaningful than at present. Further reforms could involve the extension or removal of the time limits on entering reservations that are currently in place. This would likely be controversial, but relaxing the restrictions on when parties can enter reservations would enable adaptive management in response to changing circumstances and help tailor trade measures to local contexts. For states that find the current system of CITES regulations to be undermining their sovereignty regarding the use of natural resources (SUCo-SA 2022), these reforms would, to varying degrees, help restore decidability.

Introducing a weighted voting system or veto power could facilitate fairer representation, enabling states with direct responsibility towards or interests in the use and conservation of particular species to have a proportionately greater say in proposed

regulatory changes. This could restore decidability to international wildlife trade governance, particularly for contentious wildlife commodities like rhino horn and elephant ivory (Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer 2022; Biggs et al. 2013; Biggs, Holden, et al. 2017), and would improve environmental justice in the development, implementation, and enforcement of CITES decisions (Bennett and Satterfield 2018). At CoP19 in 2022, Botswana and Zimbabwe proposed amending CITES rules of procedure to a weighted voting system, wherein each party's vote would be proportionate to the population of a given species present in that country (CITES 2022a). Countries with larger populations would have a greater say in proposed regulatory changes for that species; range states with smaller populations and non-range states would have less influence accordingly. Although South Africa, Indonesia, Tanzania, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo supported the proposal on the basis of fairness, it was rejected due to various concerns, including the complexities of calculating weightings, uncertainties and variable quality of species population assessments, and the role of demand and transit countries in decision-making. Critically, the proposal highlighted deep-seated frictions and structural weaknesses within CITES. Some countries have long felt that the current decision-making process leaves them disenfranchised, marginalized, and forced to bear the burden of implementing decisions that are not in their national interest—all indicative of a loss of decidability (Challender et al. 2015; Weber et al. 2015).

Against this backdrop, it is important to advance the discourse on potential reforms to the CITES voting structure in a considered way. Established systems of weighted voting from other fora should be referenced, such as the International Tropical Timber Organization's (ITTO) voting mechanism. Simplifying the weightings calculations, for example, to a binary system of "range state" or "non-range state," may alleviate some concerns over complexity and population assessment uncertainties while retaining some of the advantages of such a reform. A hybrid system could also be considered, in which a proportion of overall votes would be allocated to equal voting, with another proportion reserved for range states and weighted by the share of the total species population. Weighted voting could also be introduced in phases, beginning with decisions relating to taxa for which it is immediately practicable given data availability and coupled with the development of guidance for acquiring adequate and up-to-date ecological data for other species to enable weighted voting in future phases. In laying out the aim of building the capacity to implement weighted voting wherever possible, guidance may need to acknowledge that such data may not become available for many taxa for some time. For any weighted voting structure, independent or third-party verification would be necessary to reduce the possibility of countries gaming the system by inflating population estimates to gain greater influence (Darimont et al. 2018).

A further reform option would be to grant states with overwhelming interests in the conservation of specific species the right to veto decisions. This would be analogous to the veto power held by the five permanent UN Security Council members. Countries home to endemic species or the majority of a species' population could be granted a decisive say over the utilization and management of natural resources occurring within their borders, thereby safeguarding decidability and sovereignty (Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer 2022). For instance, Canada is home to 60%–80% of polar bears and could be granted veto power over regulatory changes relating to trade (CITES 2013b). With 90% of the world's white rhinos (Emslie et al. 2016), South Africa would be able to veto trade-related decisions for this species. Provisions could be included to require countries wishing to retain their veto power to regularly provide evidence demonstrating that species populations remain secure and that any trade is being conducted sustainably. This would restore decidability for countries with the greatest direct interest in the trade and conservation of particular species while incentivizing investment in conservation, long-term wildlife population monitoring, and related scientific research.

4.2 | Enable Equity: Empowering People Whose Livelihoods Are Most Impacted by CITES Decisions

Social equity is an important ideal in the public policy sphere. In environmental management, social equity refers to the fair or just treatment of individuals or groups across four dimensions: procedural, distributional, recognitional, and contextual (Law et al. 2018). It is important in biodiversity conservation for both ethical and pragmatic reasons (Klein et al. 2015; Law et al. 2018). First, conservationists have a moral responsibility to stakeholders and communities who may be negatively impacted by conservation measures, as well as to the species in question (e.g., human-wildlife conflict and damage-causing species) (Braczkowski et al. 2023). Second, the effectiveness of conservation measures often depends on the outcomes experienced by key stakeholders and communities, providing an outcome-based motivation to strive for greater social equity in conservation. Ensuring context specificity and social legitimacy are necessary for conservation measures to succeed (IPBES 2022). Trust and social legitimacy are critical for stakeholders to accept conservation policies and comply with regulations like wildlife trade controls (Arias 2015; Kolmaš 2021; Swan and Conrad 2014). Equity is explicitly described in marine conservation and protected area management objectives (Bennett et al. 2019; Cisneros-Montemayor et al. 2021; Dawson et al. 2018). Instruments such as the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and organizations like the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) include equity in their mandates and policies (Friedman et al. 2018). CITES should accelerate the incorporation of social equity into its processes. This would help create the participatory and inclusive governance conditions necessary for realizing social equity alongside environmental sustainability and economic viability in wildlife trade governance.

CITES listing decisions are currently informed by a narrow focus on primarily biological parameters, for which extensive and detailed guidance is provided. The reality that wildlife trade is a socioeconomic activity is inadequately addressed. Socioeconomic factors are nominally included in the listing criteria's chapeau text but are only tangentially addressed in the actual criteria (Challender and MacMillan 2019; CITES 2016; Cooney et al. 2021). The Standing Committee Working Group on CITES and Livelihoods has developed a set of Rapid Assessment Tools (CITES and Livelihoods Toolkit) for parties to voluntarily evaluate the positive and negative impacts of CITES listing decisions specifically and only on "the livelihoods

of the poor" (CITES 2013a). While any interested actors can, in theory, attend the different CITES meetings and liaise with parties on decision-making, there is critically no requirement or systematic process in place for stakeholder representation in decision-making. This deficiency persists despite longstanding recognition of the importance of effective engagement among conservation scientists, as well as repeated commitments made by governments at high-level policy forums to support community engagement in tackling illegal wildlife trade (Biggs, Cooney, et al. 2017; Cheung, Doughty, et al. 2021; Roe and Booker 2019). Observers participating at CITES meetings are limited to preapproved organizations that are technically qualified in wildlife protection, conservation, or management. These non-state actors are able to influence CITES decisions in various ways, including through issue framing and agenda setting (Challender and MacMillan 2019). Any stakeholder key to the sustainable use of species can arguably be considered qualified and be granted observer status, and workshops and consultations are sometimes held with different stakeholders prior to CoP meetings to generate support (or opposition) to listing proposals. However, in practice, many businesses, industry groups, and communities most impacted by CITES decisions do not engage with CITES processes or attend meetings; future research should seek to identify major impediments to participation and how CITES can facilitate and encourage more meaningful involvement.

4.3 | Inclusive Decision-Making: Engaging Stakeholders

Neglecting to consider the values and circumstances of key stakeholders can jeopardize the perceived legitimacy and effectiveness of ecologically sound solutions to conservation challenges, including wildlife trade controls (Challender et al. 2025; Weizman et al. 2023). For example, negative perceptions of CITES in terms of its legitimacy and benefit for conservation are associated with greater noncompliance in the orchid trade (Hinsley et al. 2017). To address present deficiencies, CITES could seek to establish systematic, collaborative processes mandating that key stakeholders be identified and given the opportunity to be represented in decision-making. Ensuring that formal mechanisms are in place to mandatorily and explicitly consider the sociocultural contexts of key stakeholders will help raise the responsiveness of CITES and improve social equity in wildlife trade governance. The stakeholders in the wildlife trade—and their motivations for using wildlife—are diverse, and myriad socioeconomic, political, legal, ethical, and environmental factors are often at play (Phelps et al. 2016; Thomas-Walters et al. 2020). These complexities make it difficult for there to be a blueprint or one-size-fits-all approach to stakeholder and community engagement (Roe and Booker 2019). Stakeholder engagement efforts in the past have tended to be more focused on local communities in supply countries (Roe and Booker 2019), and the Standing Committee Working Group on CITES and Livelihoods' focus on "the livelihoods of the poor" means that impacts on demand-side stakeholders are typically ignored. We recommend that the rules of procedure be revised to mandate that member states take action to provide opportunities for the most directly relevant supply-side and demand-side stakeholders to be represented in decision-making. A resolution on supply chain engagement could also serve this function. Greater representation in decision-making for key stakeholders will enable their distinct sociocultural contexts to be better considered and would likely result in greater legitimacy for CITES and improved compliance (Challender et al. 2025; Hinsley et al. 2017; Law et al. 2018). Given time constraints at CoP meetings, parties and key actors along the supply chain could convene to find common ground in species management approaches ahead of meetings.

For there to be a system wherein key stakeholders are represented in decision-making, determining who qualifies for representation can be a challenge. Employing an evidence-based approach may be most effective, for example, by expanding the CITES and Livelihoods Toolkit to cover a broader array of stakeholders and convening a committee of independent experts on the trade in a particular species to use such tools to determine the breadth of stakeholder involvement (e.g., the range of relevant stakeholders and which groups among them should be given representation). Such a committee would also need to determine the manner, direction, and intensity of communication and collaboration, as well as the extent of decision-making power to be delegated to the selected stakeholders (e.g., ability to vote or veto) (Newig et al. 2018). There are different options as to how stakeholder representation could be introduced, from requiring parties submitting proposals to amend Appendices I and II to demonstrate prior engagement with key supply- and demand-side stakeholders to widening the observer criteria to allow these stakeholders to be able to take part in CITES meetings. Formalizing participatory and inclusive governance would not only ensure that both supply- and demand-side stakeholders are more equitably represented in decision-making but also, importantly, help guarantee that funds are available for stakeholder engagement activities.

5 | Conclusion

Polarization over wildlife use means that certain countries are finding themselves increasingly disenfranchised by global wildlife trade governance. Tensions are coming to a head at CITES, where polarization over the elephant ivory and rhino horn trade has pushed a bloc of SADC countries to suggest withdrawal. Continued high-level discussion of the matter (KAZA 2024) indicates that their suggestion of withdrawing from CITES should not be dismissed lightly. They have a contemporary precedent to reference: Japan left the IWC in 2019 because of polarization over commercial whaling. The common threads between the two cases are clear: changing organizational ethos, polarization amongst members creating contradictory social orders, influence of non-state actors trumping scientific guidance, and loss of decidability for dissenting nations that causes disenfranchisement. As concerning as these similarities are, these common threads mean that critical lessons can be learned from the experience of Japan's IWC withdrawal and applied to enact urgent reforms to prevent polarization from tearing CITES apart.

Protecting the integrity of the CITES framework is critical for biodiversity conservation, as there is simply no other multilateral agreement currently in existence for regulating the trade in wild fauna and flora. We propose several reforms to CITES, which, in practical terms, would give parties, including the SADC countries considering withdrawal, greater say over conservation strategies and management approaches for natural resources within their

national borders, including more influence in the shaping of international wildlife trade policy. Controlled legal trade in elephant ivory and rhino horn, if supported by appropriate scientific evidence, would become more feasible, which would be unpalatable for some actors and stakeholders. However, the alternative may result in worse outcomes. Countries opting to withdraw from treaty organizations is a clear indicator of failure in collective decision-making in global environmental governance. While calls to withdraw indicate that some countries feel sufficiently backed into a corner as to sound out their frustrations, they also suggest that considered reforms—and careful compromise—can put global environmental governance back on track to encourage cooperation and constructive dialogue. Enacting any or all of the reforms focused on restoring decidability, enabling equity, and implementing inclusive decision-making herein discussed could go some way to improving the effectiveness, equitability, responsiveness, and robustness of CITES.

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