

Recent Developments in CITES Concerning the International Trade in Queen Conch (*Strombus gigas*)

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ABSTRACT

Despite years of regional discussions and trade regulation under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), most queen conch fisheries suffer from uncoordinated management and unsustainable harvest. Queen conch is listed in Appendix II of the treaty and, as such, each shipment of the species must be accompanied by a permit for which the exporting country has made findings that the specimens have been legally acquired and that the trade is sustainable. The Appendix-II listing for Queen conch has proven to be a useful complement to national management programs. In April 2003, the CITES Secretariat released a lengthy analysis of the Caribbean conch fisheries and associated international trade. Subsequently, the International Queen Conch Initiative (IQCI) convened its members to discuss this report and renew calls for regional cooperation on law enforcement, management measures, and capacity building. A list of regional commitments resulted from this meeting, and will be formally transmitted to the CITES process as the trade analysis unfolds. These commitments will be considered as CITES considers how member countries should act to reduce poaching, coordinate management, and ensure sustainable international trade in the species. This entire process, known as the CITES "review of significant trade" will require governments in the Wider Caribbean to bring about sustainable use of this resource, via binding management advice from an international technical committee. Specific CITES actions and timelines for their completion will be available by autumn 2003. This report discusses the reasons for a second CITES trade analysis, presents fundamentals of the CITES significant trade review process, highlights the outcomes of a 2003 technical committee meeting, and makes some conclusions about the future of regional conch management in the wider Caribbean.

KEY WORDS: CITES, Queen conch, *Strombus gigas*

Sucesos Recientes en la Convención sobre el Comercio Internacional de Especies Amenazadas de Fauna y Flora Silvestres (CITES) Relacionados con el Comercio Internacional del Carrucho o Cobo (*Strombus gigas*)

A pesar de varios años de discusiones regionales y regulación de comercio bajo la Convención sobre el Comercio Internacional de Especies Amenazadas de Fauna y Flora Silvestres (CITES), la mayoría de las pesquerías del carrucho sufren de manejo no coordinado y la extracción no sustentable. El carrucho está incluido en el Apéndice II de CITES y, por consiguiente, para su exportación se requiere un permiso para el cual el país exportador ha determinado que los especímenes han sido adquiridos legalmente y que el comercio es sustentable. La inclusión en el Apéndice II del carrucho ha comprobado ser un complemento muy útil para los programas de manejo nacionales. En abril de 2003, la Secretaría de la CITES hizo público un análisis de las pesquerías de carrucho en el Caribe y el comercio internacional asociado con ellas. Posteriormente, la Iniciativa Internacional sobre el Carrucho (IQCI por sus siglas en inglés) convocó a sus miembros para discutir este reporte y reanudar las llamadas para la colaboración regional en la aplicación de la ley, medidas de manejo y capacitación. Una lista de compromisos regionales fue producida durante esta reunión, la cual será transmitida oficialmente al proceso CITES mientras el análisis del comercio continúa. Estos compromisos serán considerados mientras CITES considera como los países miembros deben actuar para reducir la caza furtiva, coordinar manejo, y asegurar el comercio internacional sustentable en la especie. Este proceso, conocido como el "examen de comercio significativo de CITES," requerirá que los gobiernos de los países de distribución de la especie realicen el uso sustentable de este recurso a través de recomendaciones de manejo de un comité técnico internacional. Las acciones específicas de la CITES y fechas para realizarlas estarán disponibles para el otoño de 2003.

PALABRAS CLAVES: CITES, Carrucho, lambí, caracol reina, strombe géant *Strombus gigas*

EFFORTS TOWARD QUEEN CONCH CONSERVATION IN FISHERIES ORGANIZATIONS

The need for coordinated management of queen conch (*Strombus gigas*) has long been recognized by fisheries scientists and managers in the wider Caribbean region. At the "Workshop on Biology, Fisheries, Mariculture and Management of the Queen Conch *Strombus gigas*", convened in Caracas, Venezuela, in 1991, many scientific and management officers expressed their concern about the status of the resource in the Caribbean region and the need to implement a common regional management strategy for the fishery. In 1996, the First International Queen Conch Conference was convened, supported by the Caribbean Fisheries Management Council, the National Marine Fisheries

Service Office of Protected Resources, the Government of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

The Conference was held in San Juan, Puerto Rico, on July 29-31, 1996. It convened fishery managers and scientists from the Caribbean Region to discuss the latest information on research, stock assessment and management alternatives for the queen conch fishery. The participants adopted the Declaration of San Juan, which called for a common international management strategy for the queen conch resource in the Caribbean region, as the initial step of the Initiative. From 1996 to 2001, seven meetings and workshops of the wider Caribbean Initiative and numerous sub-regional meetings were convened.

In addition to fisheries bodies, other organizations were concerned about the status of the species. In 1990, the Parties to the Convention for the Protection and Development of the Marine Environment of the Wider Caribbean Region (Cartagena Convention) included queen conch in Annex II of its Protocol Concerning Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife (SPAW Protocol) as a species that may be utilized on a rational and sustainable basis and that require protective measures. Because of this recognition, the United States proposed queen conch for listing in Appendix II at the 8th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to CITES (COP8, Kyoto (Japan), 2-13 March 1992), where the proposal was adopted.

INTRODUCTION TO CITES

The CITES treaty was agreed in 1973 in Washington, and entered into force in 1975. The treaty now has over 160 member countries or “Parties”, and aims to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival. Meetings of the Conference of the Parties (COPs) are convened meet every two to three years to review how the treaty is working, resolve policy issues, amend lists of protected species and work together to ensure wildlife trade is carried out in accordance with the treaty.

The CITES Animals and Plants Committees, which includes technical experts from each of six global regions, meet annually between COPs to provide technical support to decision-making about species in international trade.

These committees of experts were established to fill gaps in biological and other specialized knowledge regarding species of animals and plants that are (or might become) subject to CITES trade controls. The Standing Committee also meets annually to provide policy guidance to the Secretariat and oversees the management of the Secretariat's budget. Beyond these key roles, it coordinates and oversees, where required, the work of other committees and working groups and to carry out tasks given to it by the Conference of the Parties.

CITES BASICS

CITES regulates international trade, not only in endangered species of animals and plants, but also in those that might become endangered if trade is not subject to strict controls. Following are the definitions and requirements for the various levels of regulation in CITES:

- i) *Appendix I* — species in danger of extinction. All commercial trade in wild specimens is prohibited. Other international movement of Appendix-I specimens (e.g., scientific collections) occurs if the exporting and importing country concur and issue appropriate permits. Appendix I includes hundreds of species, including a number of marine taxa such as the great whales, all marine turtles, and several finfish.
- ii) *Appendix II* — species vulnerable to overexploitation for which commercial trade should be regulated so that they will not become further threatened with extinction. Commercial trade and other international movement of Appendix-II specimens is allowed if the exporting country has issued a permit and determined that the specimens were legally obtained and their export does not constitute a threat to the species' survival. Appendix II contains over 30,000 taxa (more than 90% of all CITES-listed species), including such marine species as seahorses, all dolphin species not included in Appendix I, queen conch, all stony corals, and giant clams.
- iii) *Appendix III* — species for which a country needs the cooperation of other countries in order to control international trade to complement domestic regulation. International trade requires an export permit from the listing country and a certificate of origin from all other countries. Appendix III contains a modest number of species, including marine taxa such as walrus and an Ecuadoran sea cucumber.

Countries may unilaterally list species for which they have domestic regulation in Appendix III at any time. Decisions concerning Appendix I and II species listings and resolutions are made at meetings of the Conference of the Parties that are convened approximately every two years.

The benefits of CITES are many and varied. It establishes a legal framework to regulate international trade, monitor trade volumes, and prevent overexploitation or extinction. It generates the most thorough database of information on global wildlife and plant trade available. In the CITES system, importing and exporting countries share responsibility to ensure trade is sustainable and legal. CITES listings (or the potential for listing) also promote research to assess population status of species in trade and the effects of international trade on those taxa.

SUMMARY OF MODERN QUEEN CONCH TRADE

Queen conch has been listed in Appendix II since 1992. Despite several years of CITES regulation, the international trade in queen conch dramatically escalated in volume between 1992 and 2001. Exports of *S. gigas* meat tripled

from 1.1 million kg in 1994 to 3.1 million kg in 2001 (Theile 2003). The increase in exports was most notable in countries such as Honduras, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti that lacked significant programs for monitoring landings, effort, or stock status (Theile 2003). The shell trade, which is incidental to the meat fishery, also escalated from a minimum of 59,000 specimens in 1994 to 370,000 minimum in 2001 (Theile 2003). Although some countries have large domestic markets for conch meat (e.g., Bahamas, United States), most of the global landings in *S. gigas* are destined for international trade (Theile 2003). The resource has attained significant socio-economic importance, since it is commercially harvested in 26 of the 36 range countries and has a landings value second only to spiny lobster (*Panulirus argus*) (CRFM 2003). There is currently no regional fishery management organization (RFMO) responsible for cooperative management of the queen conch resource. Therefore, the CITES Parties have attempted to address unsustainable trade through a process of data review, international dialogue, and the threat of trade sanctions.

QUEEN CONCH AND CITES: THE REVIEW OF SIGNIFICANT TRADE

In 1992, the CITES Parties codified a process in which their technical committees could analyze voluminous commercial trade in Appendix-II species. The Plants Committee and Animals Committee select species for this review based on recent trade trends, recommendations of the Parties, and independent reports. Most importantly, this process could make binding recommendations to countries that the committees determined were trading selected species unsustainably. These recommendations are binding since noncompliant countries face the threat of trade suspension from all the other CITES Parties. This process, known as the “review of significant trade” first appeared as CITES Resolution Conf. 8.9 and then revised in 2002 as CITES Resolution Conf. 12.8.

After the technical committees select a species for review, Resolution Conf. 12.8 permits the CITES Secretariat to contract with outside experts and authors to draft a report on the species’ status in the wild, its global trade volumes, and its status in national management programs.

Queen conch was the subject of a significant trade review in 1995-96, which resulted in a number of trade suspensions in minor exporting (CITES 1999). Most of these trade suspensions, with the exception of that for St. Lucia, remain in effect. At the 2nd International Queen Conch Initiative Convention in 2001, the countries at the meeting took a decision to request CITES to reopen its Significant Trade review. In the face of continued stock declines and poor CITES implementation, the 17th meeting of the CITES Animals Committee (Hanoi, Vietnam; August 2001) decided to begin another review of significant trade for Queen conch. This is the first time in CITES history that a species has undergone this analysis twice. The draft report on the second significant trade review was written by TRAFFIC Europe and released by the CITES Secretariat on April 30, 2003 for a 60-day comment period among the Parties (Theile 2003). During the comment period, the International Queen Conch Initiative convened a workshop as an opportunity for fisheries

and CITES authorities in queen conch range countries to review the report and provide their input to it. The workshop generated a number of recommendations related to the CITES significant trade process, the biological and trade status of the species, in addition to needs for law enforcement, regional cooperation and public outreach.

In August 2003, the Animals Committee convened in Geneva, Switzerland and reviewed the final report on queen conch trade, which incorporated many of the comments provided by CITES Parties. At this meeting, the Committee formed a working group made up of representatives from the United States, France, Mexico, the United Kingdom, the World Bank, and the CITES Secretariat to formulate recommendations for the conch exporting countries. A single Animals Committee representative from Latin America and the Caribbean attended the working group as well. As per the mandates of Resolution Conf. 12.8, the working group categorized each of the 36 range countries in one of three categories: “urgent concern” (when it is clear that CITES export permits are issued by the government without regard to detriment on wild populations); “possible concern” (when it is not clear whether current export levels are detrimental to the species); and “least concern” (when it is clear the CITES treaty is properly applied and exports appear non-detrimental). The CITES Animals Committee then reviewed the working group’s conclusions, approved the categorization of countries, and endorsed a set of recommendations for transmission to the trading countries as per Resolution Conf. 12.8.

RESULTS

Theile (2003) provided an exhaustive analysis of trade in queen conch since the species was placed in CITES Appendix II in 1992. The report also discussed national management programs, recent research findings, and stock status in each range country.

According to Theile (2003), the United States imports 78% of the queen conch meat in trade each year. Approximately 99% of the exports are supplied by Jamaica (39%), Honduras (27%), Turks and Caicos (10%), the Dominican Republic (7%), Bahamas (7%), Colombia (4%), Belize (4%), and Haiti (< 1%).

At their August 2003 meeting, the Animals Committee placed Honduras, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti in the category of “urgent concern.” The Committee determined these countries did not have adequate information to justify their current levels of trade, and recommended a set of short-term and long-term actions to remedy the situation. Within four weeks of receiving the Committee’s recommendations, these countries had to impose unilateral moratoria on the commercial harvest (excluding legal harvest in territorial waters) and international trade of queen conch. Within six months, these countries were to designate specific areas for commercial conch fisheries in their waters, undertake density studies in these areas, analyze trends in landings data, establish a standardized minimum weight of unprocessed and processed meat that corresponds to adult specimens, and establish cautious export quotas based on these data. Within 18 months, these Parties are to design and implement fishery-dependent and – independent data collection

programs, and give consideration to the recommendations from the IQCI workshop held in June 2003 (see above).

The Animals Committee placed several countries in the category of “possible concern”, including Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Bahamas, Belize, Colombia, Cuba, Dominica, Grenada, Nicaragua, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago. Within 12 months of receiving the Committee’s recommendations, these countries are to establish cautious catch and export quotas (with justification), establish a standardized minimum weight of unprocessed and processed meat that corresponds to adult specimens, and implement fishery-dependent and – independent data collection programs. Within 24 months, these countries shall apply adaptive management procedures to ensure that future harvesting regimes will be based on newly collected data, and implement the recommendations from the June 2003 IQCI workshop (see above). Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Dominica, and Trinidad and Tobago are still under trade suspension for queen conch from the 1995 - 1997 CITES trade review.

Finally, the Animals Committee placed the remaining range countries in the category of “least concern”, which included Bermuda, Brazil, Costa Rica, France (including Guadeloupe and Martinique), Guatemala, Jamaica, Mexico, the Netherlands (including Aruba and the Netherlands Antilles), Panama, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (including Anguilla, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Montserrat and Turks and Caicos Islands), United States of America (including Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands), and Venezuela. These countries were asked to implement the recommendations from the June 2003 IQCI workshop (see above).

The deadline for the countries of “urgent concern” to implement their first recommendation (moratoria on most commercial harvest and trade) passed on September 29, 2003. Honduras and the Dominican Republic complied with the Committee’s recommendation, whereas Haiti apparently did not. The CITES Secretariat recommended that other Parties suspend trade in queen conch with all three of these countries effective September 29, 2003. The other deadlines in the Committee’s recommendations had not passed when this report was written. The United States implemented this suspension immediately, and continued existing suspensions with Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Dominica, and Trinidad and Tobago.

CONCLUSIONS

The current suspension in queen conch trade with Honduras, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic represents a stoppage in more than half of the United States’ supply of queen conch meat. This will ostensibly result in changing market patterns, emerging source countries, and potential price restructuring. In addition, law enforcement agencies will almost certainly have to readjust or heighten their investigations as traders may try to illegally import conch originating from these countries.

In addition, the authors expect that the severe trade measures recently imposed by CITES will encourage the countries in the wider Caribbean to form an RFMO for the sustainable harvest and trade in queen conch. Existing

organizations such as the Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism (CRFM) and the Western Central Atlantic Fishery Commission (WECAFC) have already expressed a desire to initiate such work, with the support of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the United States.

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