



TODAY'S NEWS

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Why Should I Care?

The **Queen Conch** is a very important marine species to the CRFM member countries that harvest the resource for both food and export. This resource provides direct employment for thousands of families across the region.

But even as countries implement systems to monitor, overfishing and poaching continue to be of concern to the CRFM.

The high value of conch meat makes it one of the most lucrative species for the small-scale fishing industries the Caribbean that depend on the resource.

Conch meat, and to a lesser extent the shells and other by-products also provide much needed income for the small-scale industry players.

The demise of conch fishery would mean the loss of thousands of jobs for fishers and members of their communities, destabilise and destroy their lives.



Processed meat from the Queen Conch ready for packaging.

NGO petition could end Caribbean Conch Exports to the US

A US-based NGO **WildEarth Guardians** has petitioned the United States Government to list the Queen Conch (*Strombus gigas*) a mainstay of the Caribbean fishing industry as endangered, a move that could cripple the industry and destroy the livelihoods of thousands of fishing communities in the region.

Conch is harvested by small-scale, semi-industrialised fishers in the region. If conch is listed as endangered or threatened, it would prevent export and deprive the fishers and their families of their incomes resulting in economic and social hardships among the poorest in the region.

Inability to export to the United States would result in the loss of US\$185 million in earnings for not only the thousands of fishermen, but also fish processors, exporters and their families, and fishing communities that rely on the fishery. Regional leaders also determine that it could undermine peace and stability in many of the coastal communities that rely on the Queen Conch resource.



The Queen Conch (Strombus gigas)

The CRFM Secretariat found:

- ◆ Grossly understated estimates of the landing in particular in major fishing states;
- ◆ Unproven statements that conch are being harvested at unsustainable levels;
- ◆ Unverified claims suggesting that conch populations are in decline and stocks are collapsing due to unsustainable harvesting methods were;
- ◆ Unproven claims that illegal harvesting and illegal international trade in conch is widespread and
- ◆ Unsubstantiated reports of low conch densities and recruitment failure that were putting fishers at risk.



Conch meat being processed.

What the Petition Said:

WildEarth Guardians, petitioned the US Secretary of Commerce, to list the queen conch as a “threatened” or “endangered” species under the US Endangered Species Act (ESA).

The petition stated that the Queen Conch is in decline and threatened with extinction, due to degradation of habitat caused by water pollution; destruction of seagrass nursery habitats; over-harvesting for commerce and inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms among other other natural and manmade factors such as biological vulnerability and human population growth.

The petition noted that: “Listing the queen conch under the ESA would provide needed protection for this species by limiting or restricting U.S. take and import of the species.”

The US Department of Commerce invited interested parties to submit comments on the petition after it was published in the August 27, 2012 Federal Register Volume 77 Number 166.

The CRFM Response:

The Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism (CRFM) has challenged the petition. In a rebuttal sent to the US Department of Commerce on October 26, 2012, the Secretariat noted that the claims made by **WildEarth Guardians** were without merit.



Workers in a processing plant prepare conch for export.

The CRFM noted that the petition contained outdated and ‘obsolete’ information as well as unsupported conclusions about the status and management of Queen Conch Fisheries in the CRFM/CARICOM member states with conch fisheries.

The Secretariat affirmed that member states have agreed that even though there is need for more stringent rules in some territories, the existing multilateral mechanism remains an effective arrangement in controlling excessive and illegal fishing practices and trade that is detrimental to the survival of the species.

In its response to the petition, the Secretariat asked the US Government to reject the Petitioner’s request. CRFM noted that there was sufficient scientific and other evidence available in member countries and on its own website to refute the allegations made by the WildEarth Guardians.

The CRFM is Working...

The CRFM, its partners and individual member states have taken steps to establish systems that will contribute to **equitable and sustainable** management of the fisheries in the Caribbean. The aim is to incorporate the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO)-approved Best Practice in conch fisheries management across the region and make fishers an important part of the data collection network.

In its efforts to define options for a **“common regional approach to managing”** the industry, CRFM in 2013 conducted a regional overview and evaluation study of the Status of Queen Conch Management Performances as well as several national case studies with a view to recommending improvements to the existing management systems.

The CRFM has also carried out a region-wide review of the existing queen conch management systems and in June of 2013, hosted a workshop to review the science and management options of various member countries.

The review also explored options to improve monitoring of landing sites for conch; evaluate management strategies; improve capacities in management and data collection across member countries; strategies to close the existing gaps in management systems among member states and ways to harmonise and strengthen the system at the regional level.

Important Facts About Conch Fishing...

- ◆ The harvesting of the Queen Conch has been a traditional means of providing protein for many Caribbean populations and conch remains a traditional dish and delicacy in some states.
- ◆ The rapid growth in conch fishery has been recent, taking place between the 1970s and 1980s, fueled mainly by international demand.
- ◆ The International trade in the Queen Conch has been regulated by the Convention in International Trade in Endangered Species of Flora and Fauna (CITES) since 1992.
- ◆ Conch meat, and to a lesser extent the shells and other by-products also provide much needed income for the small-scale industry players.
- ◆ The US Government was instrumental in placing the Queen Conch on Appendix II of CITES and was actively involved in assisting the region to address the CITES recommendations.



Conch fishing in the Caribbean is mainly done by fishermen in small canoes.



Platter of Caribbean marine products including Conch on display. Photo Courtesy of the Belize Fisheries Dept.

Important Facts About Conch cont'd

- ◆ CITES continues to monitor and supervise international trade in Queen Conch in the Caribbean.
- ◆ The listing of the Queen Conch in Appendix II means that unless the trade is regulated, **there is the chance that harvesting of the Queen Conch could become unsustainable.**
- ◆ Most harvesting nations manage the taking of the Queen Conch for both local and international trade,



The Existing Regulations

For the most part, the nations that harvest conch operate under a system of permitted harvesting. Over the past 15 years, the major harvesting nations such as the Bahamas, Jamaica, Belize, and the Turks and Caicos Islands, have used the guidelines provided by CITES to protect their stocks.

These four nations account for the most extensive stocks of the Queen Conch for which they have developed and implemented conservation and management systems and regulations to ensure sustainable use and trade. Countries with smaller stocks such as Antigua and Barbuda, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, Grenada, Dominica and Barbados have also taken measures to protect the resource.

Existing regulations include closed seasons, minimum shell lengths and meat weights, closed areas, catch and export quotas and restriction on the type of gear used in harvesting. The use of commercial fishing gear are prohibited. In Jamaica, for instance, conch fishery has been managed by a robust catch and export quota system since 2000. The system is supported and informed by periodic independent surveys of the fishing sites.

In addition to permits and quotas, management systems in harvesting countries are accompanied by public awareness campaigns as well as conservation and resource management measures to protect and conserve the Conch stocks.



Conch fishermen also fish for other species to supplement their incomes during the closed season. Photo Courtesy of the Belize Fisheries Dept., Belize City.

What Do We, CRFM Members, Say:

“The listing would, in our opinion be unreasonable, disproportionate, unfair, inequitable, and inappropriate in addressing the issues in question. It is an unnecessary and unreasonable barrier to trade in the species.

“Furthermore, if this petition succeeds, it would create significant social and economic hardship for thousands of hard working Caribbean fishers and their families, women and children, increase unemployment, poverty and vulnerability, and undermine peace and stability of coastal communities that rely on the resource. This is because it would effectively deprive them of their main source of livelihood and sustenance.”

What CRFM Members Want!

CRFM has asked the US government to reject the petition due to the many unsubstantiated claims made by the petitioner. The Secretariat noted that **Wild Earth Guardians** did not take into account the available scientific facts and that the listing would impact the income of several countries in the region.



The CRFM proposes that by expanding the range of products and markets for the trade of species such as conch, the region will be less vulnerable to the demands of external pressures.

Important Facts About Conch....cont'd

- ◆ The Queen Conch is traded by 11 of the 17 CRFM member states,
- ◆ The region recognises that the resource is vulnerable to changes in the environment resulting from degraded habitats and overfishing;
- ◆ The region recognises that conch grows and reproduces slowly.
- ◆ Countries without adequate and transparent conservation and management systems are prohibited from participating in international trade.
- ◆ Countries are not allowed to trade until they can adequately demonstrate that such systems are in place.



Conch meat



What Can We Do?

Monitoring and reporting is everybody's business

- ◆ Register with the authorities and make sure vessels are approved for conch fishing,
- ◆ Throw back undersized conch and make sure landed conch are the recommended sizes or length,
- ◆ Report all conch meat sales - fresh or dried- whether at sea or on land,
- ◆ Keep track and record the conch that is kept for domestic use,
- ◆ Report anyone who is fishing illegally and any strange vessels that are engaged in fishing and
- ◆ Lobby your government to make the changes to legislation to strengthen the monitoring process.



What Members Want.....cont'd

Member countries have also asked for, but are yet to receive the following:

- ◆ Information about how the review process works?
- ◆ Information on the steps, major deadlines and overall timeline for making decision on petitions that are before the US government
- ◆ What, if any opportunities exist for the CRFM and member nations to engage in the process?
- ◆ How can the Secretariat provide much needed scientific and management information, when and where necessary, to inform the process?

What's Next...

The US National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) a division of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency (NOAA) has informed CRFM that the process of determining whether or not to list the Queen Conch as a threatened or endangered species under the Endangered Species Act, has been delayed. The original July 1 deadline has been pushed forward to facilitate the scientific review.

According to the NMFS, the scientific status review is taking longer than anticipated, therefore the new deadline, will be on or before November 3, 2014.

The CRFM is of the view that the petition by Wild Earth Guardian is highlighting the need for diversification of markets for Caribbean marine and aquatic fisheries. For many years, member countries have relied heavily on the US or European markets for exports of marine products such as lobster and conch. The absence of alternative buyers puts pressure on the region to satisfy the demands of these markets. While these agreements guarantee a ready market for the products, it leaves the region vulnerable to the peculiarities of specific countries and or interest groups.

CRFM has urged member countries to be proactive in looking for alternative markets and to look beyond existing single country markets. Member states are being encouraged to explore marketing options including collaborative marketing. Commodity markets could not only provide options for markets but result in higher prices for the product.

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What's Next...cont'd

The region must also act quickly to further strengthen the existing management systems, data collection and enforcement measures.

Fishers, processors and other fisher-folk have a responsibility to ensure that their livelihoods are protected and preserved. That responsibility includes holding leaders accountable for enacting legislation and implementing management and enforcement regimes that protect the species, their spawning grounds and habitats.

Did You Know ?

The US has modified the trip limit for commercial harvesting of conch in the USVI to 200 conch per vessel?

That the US has banned conch imports from Haiti and Grenada because of concern that there are no long-term conservation measures in these countries?

US Banned conch fishing in the Florida Keys in 1975 because their fisheries had collapsed?

The US continues to allow harvesting of Conch in Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands

There is a growing demand for conch shells from a growing tourist industry.

The Queen Conch (Strombus gigas)



Live conch in the shell



Conch Shells are now in high demand by tourists

ABOUT THE CRFM

The Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism (CRFM) was officially inaugurated on 27 March 2003, in Belize City, Belize, where it is headquartered.

The CRFM was established following the signing of the “Agreement Establishing the CRFM” on February 4, 2002 and is an inter-governmental organization.

The CRFM’s mission is to “To promote and facilitate the responsible utilization of the region's fisheries and other aquatic resources for the economic and social benefits of the current and future population of the region”.



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