

CFMC/OSPESCA/WECAFC/CRFM¹ Working Group on Queen Conch (QCWG)

Panama City, Panama, 23–25 October 2012

Declaration of Panama City

The Members of the CFMC/OSPESCA/WECAFC/CRFM Working Group on Queen Conch:

Recalling the Terms of Reference of the joint Working Group, as established by the 14th session of the Western Central Atlantic Fishery Commission (Panama City, 6-9 February 2012);

Noting with concern the ongoing challenges in ensuring sustained and legal utilization of Queen Conch (*Strombus gigas*) resources, complying with CITES Appendix-II provisions for international trade in the species, and the limited progress made in terms of regional collaboration and coordination of the management of the resource;

Mindful of the socio-economic importance of the Queen Conch fisheries for the Wider Caribbean Region;

Reiterating the declaration of San Juan, made by the First International Queen Conch Conference, held in San Juan, Puerto Rico, in 1996, where several Caribbean countries agreed to cooperate in the management of the Queen Conch for the benefit of all nations involved, and the recommendations of the International Queen Conch Initiative - CITES workshop, held in Montego Bay in 2003 that were communicated in CITES Notification to the Parties No 2006/055 and that all range States of Queen Conch are invited to implement;

Recognizing that in recent years, national efforts for the management and conservation of Queen Conch have increased in the region, leading to encouraging developments such as better stock protection, improved understanding of the species ecology and management needs, and enhanced enforcement to combat illegal catch and trade, and that most of this progress made was CITES driven;

Further recognizing the efforts at local, national and regional level to manage Queen Conch fisheries in line with the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, the 1995 UN Fish Stocks Agreement, the precautionary approach and the Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries (EAF) as regionally promoted by the Working Group members, the 2009 FAO Agreement on Port State Measures to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing, and the provisions of CITES for international trade in the species;

¹ This is a joint species specific Working Group of the Caribbean Fisheries Management Council (CFMC), Organization for the Fisheries and Aquaculture Sector of the Central American Isthmus (OSPESCA), Western Central Atlantic Fishery Commission (WECAFC) and the Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism (CRFM).

Mindful of the obligations and available opportunities to the countries that are Party to the SPAW Protocol to work collaboratively to implement plans for conservation of Queen Conch, which is listed in Annex III of that Treaty;

Convinced that scientific research on the biology, life cycle, conservation and management of Queen Conch should continue to inform fisheries decision makers on *inter alia* suitable harvest and fishery strategies, precautionary controls, appropriate fishing capacity, and measures to enhance enforcement and compliance;

Appreciating the agreement on a Joint Action Plan of CRFM and OSPESCA, concluded in September 2012, which emphasizes the need for joint work *inter alia* on Queen Conch research and sustainable management, and the ongoing work by CFMC, CITES and WECAFC towards sustainable utilization of the resource;

Committed to individually and collectively taking measures and actions to further improve the management and conservation of the Queen Conch resource in the Wider Caribbean Region;

1. RECOMMEND the immediate implementation, as applicable, of the recommendations made by the Queen Conch Expert Workshop, held in Miami, USA, 22-24 May 2012, and reviewed and validated by the Working Group during the meeting in Panama City on 23-25 October 2012, taking into account recommendations made by the Working Group on paragraphs 1 and 5 (see Annex);
2. RECOMMEND that WECAFC, OSPESCA, CRFM and CFMC support the development of a regional plan for the management and conservation of Queen Conch, in accordance with the best available scientific evidence to be presented to the 15th session of WECAFC for review, consideration and regional adoption;
3. RECOMMEND that the Conference of the Parties to CITES take account of and discuss the information and “draft decision” provided by Colombia at its 16th meeting, and adopt recommendations as appropriate to support the sustainable utilization, conservation and international trade in Queen Conch;
4. RECOMMEND that OSPESCA and CRFM support the development and adoption of sub-regional regulations for Queen Conch, and support the implementation of these regulations by their member States;
5. RECOMMEND that the fisheries authorities in the region increase awareness and build capacity among fishers on Safety-at-Sea and in particular address risk management in and alternatives to compressed air diving for Queen Conch and seek assistance where necessary;
6. RECOMMEND the Queen Conch range States, CITES and FAO to cooperate closely and work jointly on the improvement and standardization of trade data and statistics (through regionally agreed conversion factors) for Queen Conch and its derivatives such as pearls, shells and opercula;

7. RECOMMEND that fisheries authorities with support of CRFM, OSPESCA, CFMC and WECAFC strengthen the participation of fishers in the decision making related to implementation of measures for management and sustainable utilization of Queen Conch.

REQUEST THE RESPECTIVE SECRETARIATS to present this declaration for endorsement to the 15th Session of WECAFC, which is scheduled to be held in Trinidad and Tobago in 2014, as well as to the next session of the Caribbean Fisheries Forum of CRFM and the next ministerial meeting of OSPESCA and communicate it to the CITES Secretariat for further dissemination; and

SOLICIT the support for, and the direct and immediate implementation by the countries in the Wider Caribbean Region of the above listed recommendations.

Recommendations

Of the

Queen Conch Expert Workshop

Miami, United States of America, 22–24 May 2012

Data Collection

Survey Data

- 1. Recommendation:** A default 8% of the estimated mean or median fishable biomass can be used to set a precautionary sustainable yield if only estimates of biomass are available and the stock is not depleted. Adjustments can and should be made to this value justified by the need for greater precaution or based on science showing that the stock is more or less productive than this. The biomass estimate and the derived yield should be based on the surveyed area only, and not expanded or extrapolated to areas not included in the survey. The survey should attempt to assess the different components of the population as well as the overall biomass.

The CFMC/OSPESCA/WECAFC/CRFM Working Group on Queen Conch noted that this yield estimate would be useful for data-poor fisheries and as a precautionary harvest level while further research and monitoring is conducted. However, the Working Group also emphasized the need for stock assessment and yield estimates based on best available science rather than basing harvest levels on the experience of a few countries. Therefore, range states should be encouraged to continue to develop precautionary harvest levels based on scientific research and the on-going evaluation of their harvest strategy.

- 2. Recommendation:** To improve co-ordination and effectiveness of various management controls within the region, such as closed fishing seasons, it is important that information on the distribution of maturity and size composition, as well as estimates of fishable biomass are obtained for the conch population and shared amongst relevant States on a regular basis.
- 3. Recommendation:** In the absence of other information, it is appropriate to survey the known fishing area with depth stratification. As better information becomes available, the survey area could be expanded to include additional areas based on habitat which might cover unexploited parts of the population such as juveniles or deeper water spawning stock.
- 4. Recommendation:** In designing new surveys, previous experience of the different countries should be used. Good sampling design should cover at least the fished area, taking account of diver safety. Experienced conch fishers and conch biologists should be used to conduct the surveys.

- 5. Recommendation: Where a reference point is required for the median or mean, density estimated from surveys, 100 adult conch / ha (or higher) should be used. When the median or mean density falls below this level, there is a significant risk that recruitment might be impaired, and therefore special management action might be required to rebuild density above this level.**

The CFMC/OSPESCA/WECAFC/CRFM Working Group on Queen Conch noted that for such a reference point to be useful, the survey area will clearly need to cover spawning stock. If the spawning stock is outside the survey area, then this reference point is not applicable.

- 6. Recommendation: If unexploited “deep water” biomass is a critical assumption of the harvest strategy, then its presence should be confirmed.**
- 7. Recommendation: Where possible a habitat survey should be undertaken, which can be used to extend the conch survey to get improved estimates of juveniles.**
- 8. Recommendation: Financial resources to carry out necessary management tasks should be raised from the fishing industry, possibly with government support. An export tax provides a useful way for targeted funding and also provides some bioeconomic protection for the stock, since it effectively lowers the price obtained for the product. Integrating fishery surveys with other types of survey may provide another opportunity to reduce costs on remote banks.**

CPUE Data

- 9. Recommendation: Catch and effort data should be collected routinely in all fisheries by requiring that the fishing industry provide the necessary information. These data provide abundance information in the absence of surveys, to confirm survey trends or as guidance between infrequent surveys. Importantly, they may provide a lower cost replacement for surveys as an abundance index.**
- 10. Recommendation: Where appropriate, the fishery should be required to record and report data which are relevant for improving the measurement of effort and for CPUE standardisation. These include, but would not be limited to, measures of fishing power as well as the circumstances of the fishing activity.**
- 11. Recommendation: Larger vessels (greater than or equal to 15m length) should be required to report their position routinely. GPS should also be used to map smaller vessel activity and improve measures of effort, even if not used routinely.**

Catch Data

- 12. Recommendation: It is important that estimates of all fishing mortality are obtained, including local landings and IUU as well as exports. While only one component of these might be measured routinely and accurately, the relative scale of all catches should be known.**
- 13. Recommendation: If possible, landings should be periodically sampled to provide information on size composition and maturity. While these data may not be critical, they provide useful information for management as well as indices that complement other information from surveys, and catch and effort.**
- 14. Recommendation: Conversion factors must be estimated so that catches can be compared through different levels of processing and among exports from different countries.**

Stock Assessment Models

15. **Recommendation:** A conch population and fishery operational model should be developed to simulate data using current scientific research on conch. The model software would need to be publicly available for development by the conch scientific community, so that up-to-date biological research could be incorporated easily and it could be linked to stock assessment methods.

Harvest Strategy

16. **Recommendation:** Well-defined harvest control rules should be developed for each fishery. This may codify current practice or improve current practice, but in all cases they should make management decisions clearer.
17. **Recommendation:** An independent peer review process should be developed to ensure that the best scientific advice is being supplied to the fishery, advise on additional precaution if necessary, and provide feedback on the performance of the harvest strategy. Independent review processes should also be used to ensure information quality meets minimum standards, which should be regionally agreed.

Precautionary Controls

18. **Recommendation:** The following precautionary controls are recommended to be implemented by States where appropriate:
- Prohibit compressed air based diving (SCUBA and “hookah”) to protect the stocks in deeper water.
 - Implement a 2-3 month closed period around main spawning periods, preferably harmonised with neighbouring fisheries.
 - Clearly proscribe gears or methods for catching queen conch. New fishing gears or methods should require an evaluation of their impact on the ecosystem.
 - Establish minimum size limits on shells (length / for flared lip) that can be enforced and are harmonised with neighbouring fisheries.
 - Establish minimum meat weight that can be landed, and that can be enforced within the international trade.
 - License vessels, and apply a limited entry system that can prevent increases in fishing capacity until the potential yield has been estimated.

Fishing Capacity

19. **Recommendation:** If possible, measure fleet fishing capacity and ensure that it matches the productivity of fishing grounds to which it has access. If the capacity exceeds productivity, a capacity reduction program should be implemented.

Ecosystem Management

20. **Recommendation:** In designing and consulting on MPAs or no take zones, account should be taken of conch population distribution and structure.

21. **Recommendation:** Habitat maps of the coastal zone should be developed which identify, among other things, conch habitat particularly with respect to spawning and juveniles.
22. **Recommendation:** Improve information on stock identification and links between population and population components through larval surveys and/or genetic studies.
23. **Recommendation:** An ecosystem model with explicit treatment of conch, particularly as prey, would be useful to determine the wider implications of conch fisheries on the ecosystem. The wider implication of conch fisheries on predators would need to consider the different life history stages explicitly.
24. **Recommendation:** Given the limited information of the wider effects of conch fisheries, and the effects on other human activities on conch, an Ecological Risk Assessment would be valuable to identify the most important risks which could be subject to further research, mitigation by management and/or increased monitoring.

Decision-Making Process

25. **Recommendation:** Co-management approaches should, as far as possible, be implemented in all conch fisheries. Involving stakeholders in decisions on access to the resources and controls on harvest has been found to lead to greater compliance.
26. **Recommendation:** Establish or use current Working Groups to review scientific advice regarding queen conch fishery policies and practices, and regularly evaluate the management performance of States involved in queen conch fishery and trade.
27. **Recommendation:** National fishery management plans should be published for each fishery, documenting *inter alia* the harvest strategy, decision-making process and roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders.

Enforcement and compliance

28. **Recommendation:** The following recommendations represent a set of possible approaches to combat IUU and improve enforcement in the region. Given the on-going problems with enforcement, there are unlikely to be any simple solutions. However, there are a number of initiatives and procedures which could be enhanced and encouraged:
 - a. Require that vessels which could be involved in IUU activity (i.e. larger vessels) carry a satellite Vessel Monitoring System (VMS). VMS should be harmonised across the region to allow range States to monitor activity of any vessel that may stray into national waters.
 - b. Implement an auditable “chain of custody” procedure, so that catches can be traced back to their catch location, and not just their point of landing or point of export. Catch documentation procedures are already required by HACCP and the EU, and CITES permit and certificate system could track queen conch entering international trade.
 - c. Research practical technology to enhance the traceability of queen conch, including labelling, marking, DNA stock identification, etc.
 - d. Implement closed seasons such that they are similar among countries, so landing any conch within a larger region can be prohibited.
 - e. Develop a regional vessel registration system or a positive vessel list.
 - f. Develop a negative IUU vessel list for the region, so that vessels identified as

involved in IUU activity can be publicly listed (see www.tuna.org.org/vesselneg.htm). This information can be used to discriminate against vessels which have an illegal record even if they are not captured and prosecuted at the time.

- g. Improve co-operation among countries and share enforcement information through bilateral agreements and improved data exchange protocols**

CITES

- 29. Recommendation: Draft and submit a resolution for 16th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to CITES summarising in general terms the findings, conclusions and recommendations of this Expert Workshop and other relevant guidance concerning the management of and trade in Queen conch.**