



CITES, Santiago and conservation in the live fish trades

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The recent CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) meeting, held in Santiago, Chile, ended on some high notes for fish conservation after two exhausting weeks of debate, politics and a lot of sitting around. This was the 12th Conference of the Parties (CoP12). The term Parties refers to countries that are signatories to the Convention, each of which can send delegations to the Conference to vote on various proposals discussed for listing on CITES Appendices I and II. There are currently 159 Parties (although not all were present in Santiago, and Kuwait has newly become a Party).

What is the significance of the various CITES appendices and what marine species in the live reef fish trades are included? CITES is the only widely recognised, respected and implemented international instrument that deals with the sustainable international trade in wild species. It involves three appendices. The best known is Appendix I, which prohibits any commercial trade in species already endangered, such as tigers, gorillas or coelacanths. This appendix does not include species in the live reef fish trades. In practice, the most important appendix is Appendix II, which includes species that are not endangered but may become so if trade is not regulated. An inclusion on Appendix II enables international trade to continue provided that listed species are properly monitored and regulated to ensure that any trade (all of which requires a license or permit) is sustainable and comes from a legal source. Appendix II includes about 95 per cent of all species listed by CITES. Marine fish that are traded live and that are now (see below) on Appendix II are the seahorses (genus *Hippocampus*). Appendix III includes species at the request of a particular Party that already regulates trade in the species and needs the cooperation of other countries to prevent unsustainable or illegal exploitation. No marine fish traded live are on Appendix III. More details on CITES can be found at www.cites.org/index.html.

Given the growing global problems with marine fisheries (both live and dead) and increasing international trade, one of the most significant outcomes of the Santiago meeting was the inclusion of

marine fish of significant commercial importance for the first time. Seahorses are sold dead for medicines, and alive for the marine aquarium trade. Serious declines in their populations and sizes have been noted in the last decade. This listing (as well as those of the basking shark, *Cetorhinus maximus*, and the whale shark, *Rhincodon typus*) represented a landmark decision because, until now, the Convention has not played an important role in any global fishery (live or dead). The humphead wrasse, *Cheilinus undulatus*, a small volume but high value species in the live reef food fish trade, was also proposed for Appendix II because of marked declines in sizes and numbers caught over the last 10 years and the increasing predominance in international trade of juveniles, amongst other problems. Although this proposal did not go through at CoP12, it had the support of the CITES Secretariat, of IUCN (the World Conservation Union), and fell just seven votes short of the required two-thirds majority for an Appendix II listing. Opponents to this listing included a number of the range states (i.e. countries that fall within the geographic range of *C. undulatus*). The major importer of this species, Hong Kong, China, had earlier submitted comments when reviewing the Appendix II proposal that the government could not support the listing for the humphead wrasse, in part because there was insufficient information on the species. They also argued that protecting this species would not reduce the use of cyanide. While humphead wrasse is widely caught with cyanide, the conservation problem and the key issue in the CITES context is not with this poison but with overfishing and lack of effective management in many of the key exporting range states. For more information on this species see www.humpheadwrasse.info.

It is important to examine why commercial fishery species, typically, have not been included on CITES appendices and why such arguments are no longer valid excuses to exclude fishes from CITES appendices. There are several reasons but probably three that are most important. I give them in some detail since all are relevant to the humphead wrasse proposal. The first is that only relatively recently are we coming to realise that commercially exploited

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marine fish could possibly be threatened with extinction (or rather, that there is no reason to believe that they are any different from other plants and animals in this respect). Misperceptions linger, however. One Party at CoP12, which shall remain nameless, actually suggested in this global forum that it was obvious that 'primitive' groups such as the sharks could never become extinct because they had already survived for such a long time on Earth! No comment. The second reason that commercial fish have not previously been seriously considered for CITES listings is because for many, there are regional fishery management authorities or the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations that can, or at least could, deal with threats to the species. In such cases, it is argued, CITES is simply not needed. However, FAO does not actually manage fish and many regions have no, or at least no effective, regional fishery management authority. The third reason given is that there is insufficient information on most fish to properly assess their conservation status. While it is certainly true that

aquatic marine species are difficult to evaluate in terms of their population status, fishery management is often based on similarly inadequate data as that used to determine conservation status and may represent the best available scientific data available. What is obvious, is that if there is clear indication of serious declines in landings or sizes, there is likely to be reason for concern and need for management or conservation action.

The Santiago meeting is considered to have been one of the most politicised of all CoPs, but it also made ground-breaking progress with several listings, including those of commercial fish. One thing is clear: for species that are heavily traded, vulnerable and not effectively managed, CITES is a critically important management and conservation tool. For many species, including our live-traded humphead wrasse, it may well be the only one. Indeed, an Appendix II listing for this species, which would still allow trade, albeit regulated, may be the only means of ensuring its sustainable use long into the future.



Protecting and managing reef fish spawning aggregations in the Pacific

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Destructive fishing practices that target key species and degrade fragile coral habitats are among the major threats to the viability of coral reef ecosystems. Many reef fish form aggregations at predictable places and times, frequently for the purpose of spawning. The nature of spawning aggregations makes them extremely vulnerable to elimination by overfishing. It can take as few as two to three years of intensive fishing on spawning aggregations to essentially eliminate breeding populations of fish. There is presently little awareness of — or capacity to address — this threat to the reef fish of the Pacific. The spawning aggregation phenomenon is rarely reflected in fishery management plans or the design of marine protected areas (MPAs).

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) has received grants from the US government's East Asia and Pacific Environmental Initiative, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, and the Oak Foundation to improve the conservation of reef fish aggregation sites in a number of Pacific Island countries.

Over the next two years, the project will work to improve resource management and spawning aggregation site protection, increase awareness of these resources' vulnerability to overexploitation, and enhance the capacity to manage fish spawning aggregations and MPAs that incorporate these sites. There are three objectives:

1. to develop and facilitate the application of cost-effective management controls on the exploitation of aggregating reef fish resources,
2. to strengthen the capacity to assess, monitor, and manage reef fish aggregations, and
3. to raise the awareness and appreciation among stakeholders of the vulnerability of aggregating reef fish populations and associated ecosystems, the nature and significance of spawning aggregations, and options for improving management.

The project will build on partnerships and activities carried out during the past three years under the Live Reef Fish Trade initiative and the

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