

Three species of teatfish to be protected by CITES

Marie Di Simone,¹ Arnaud Horellou¹ and Chantal Conand²

Introduction

The 18th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (CoP18) to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) (CITES Secretariat 2009a) was held in Geneva in August 2019. As a result of two and a half years of work outlined in an article in the *Beche-de-mer Information Bulletin* “Towards a CITES listing of teatfish” (Di Simone et al. 2019), the proposal to include three Holothuriidae (teatfish) species – *Holothuria fuscogilva*, *H. nobilis* and *H. whitmaei* in Appendix II was submitted by the European Union (EU) and co-sponsored by the United States of America (USA), Seychelles, Kenya and Senegal. Committee I of the conference debated the proposal on 25 August, and it was accepted by secret ballot, with 108 Parties in favour and 30 against. After 17 years of discussions (Bruckner 2006; Robin des Bois 2019), three sea cucumber species were, for the first time ever, listed in CITES Appendix II on 28 August 2019 in plenary session.

A proposal widely supported....

This listing proposal has received the support of a large number of Parties to CITES, including many intergovernmental organisations such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature, and non-governmental organisations such as Robin des Bois, World Wildlife Fund (WWF), and the Species Survival Network (Fig. 1). A letter of support for the proposal, initiated by Biological Diversity and signed by 26 holothurian scientists and specialists from around the world, was forwarded to CITES.

Among the all of the listing proposals submitted on marine species, only the one about teatfish has received a favourable analysis from FAO. The Sixth Expert Advisory Panel was held in Rome from 21 to 25 January 2019, to consider four listing proposals to CITES concerning commercially exploited aquatic species, including the teatfish proposal. The panel determined that the species *H. whitmaei* met the criteria for listing in CITES Appendix II, and that the other two species met the “look alike” criteria (FAO 2019).

The French CITES Scientific Authority (SA France), under the EU delegation, participated in the two teatfish side events in the margins of CoP18. The first, organised by WWF and

the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), with the participation of the Sri Lankan and USA CITES Management Authority, SA France, WWF and Robin des Bois, focused on the biology and the legal and illegal trade of teatfish (Fig. 2). The second, organised by FAO, with interventions from SA France, FAO and the Pacific Community, focused on the proposal itself, including its strengths and weaknesses, and local fisheries management. The proposal has been the subject of media coverage in 2019, such as the magazine *Le Marin*, the radio programme *France Inter* and on the websites of Biological Diversity and Robin des Bois.

...but somewhat contested

There was no consensus, however, on the proposal, which is the real reason why discussions did not end with a consensus in Committee I. China, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Tonga, as well as other Asian, Pacific and Oceanian countries, did not support the proposal, mainly for fear of implementation difficulties and the needed and necessary capacity building, especially for small-scale and local fisheries.

These countries expressed concerns regarding the difficulties of implementing this listing, including its impact on communities dependent on sea cucumbers for their livelihoods, as well as the significant management burden that would result from listing the teatfish (CITES Secretariat 2019b).

Parties supporting the proposal (Australia, Chile, Senegal and the USA) have also all noted a current lack of comprehensive measures to ensure sustainable management (CITES Secretariat 2019b).

The lack of data in the proposal, raised by China at the 30th Animals Committee (19 July 2018), was not highlighted this time, as the final proposal had been strongly consolidated on this aspect. However, producing data at the local level to carry out non-detriment findings remains a challenge.

Solutions to face these challenges

In view of concerns expressed by some Pacific countries about the importance of holothurians to livelihoods and the need for capacity building, the EU committed itself to provide technical and financial support to assist Parties that may need additional capacity to effectively implement the listing

¹ French CITES Scientific Authority, Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, contacts: marie.di-simone@mnhn.fr and arnaud.horellou@mnhn.fr

² Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, contact: chantal.conand@mnhn.fr

proposal, and thus implement a global capacity building programme (CITES Secretariat 2019b).

Also, the USA, on behalf of co-sponsors, proposed to amend the proposal to delay the entry into force of this listing by 12 months. It will now enter into force on 28 August 2020 (CITES Secretariat 2019b).

The implementation of Appendix II management and control measures for the three teatfish species, organised by Article IV of CITES, will determine the future CITES listing for other sea cucumber species. This first listing for these animals at CoP is a leap into the unknown and for many, proof that CITES is the right instrument for their conservation remains to be provided. Possible future listings of other species meeting CITES criteria will only be possible with results obtained on teatfish in the coming years.



Figure 1. Sharks, fish and a sea cucumber welcome delegates to the venue as the third day of CITES CoP18 continues.



Figure 2. Intervention by France at a side event for a presentation of the teatfish proposal in Geneva at CoP18. From left to right: Daniel Fernando (Sri Lanka) explained the support of his country, which should have hosted CoP, for this proposal. Colman Criodain (WWF) was the moderator, and he explained the need to preserve these animals (in general). The French SA (Arnaud Horellou and Marie di Simone) presented the biology and habitats of teatfish. Charlotte Nithart of Robin des Bois presented the legal and illegal trade. Rosemarie Gnam (USA CITES Management Authority) presented the background of holothurians at CITES.

It is important that the listing of these three sea cucumber species in CITES Appendix II be done in an optimal way to encourage new classifications of other holothurian species, as long as some would meet the CITES listing criteria.

References

- Bruckner A. 2006. Proceedings of the CITES workshop on the conservation of sea cucumbers in the families Holothuriidae and Stichopodidae. Silver Spring, MD: US Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Marine Fisheries Service.
- Biological Diversity. 2019. Teatfish sea cucumbers get much-needed global trade protections. Available from: <https://biologicaldiversity.org/w/news/press-releases/teatfish-sea-cucumbers-get-much-needed-global-trade-protections-2019-08-25/> (Accessed 19 September 2019).
- CITES Secretariat. 2019a. Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. Available from: <https://www.cites.org/sites/default/files/eng/disc/CITES-Convention-EN.pdf> (Accessed 19 September 2019).
- CITES Secretariat. 2019b. Summary records – Eighteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties. URL https://cites.org/sites/default/files/esp/cop/18/Com_I/SR/S-CoP18-Com-I-Rec-12.pdf (Accessed 19 September 2019).
- Di Simone M., Conand C. and Horellou A. 2019. Towards a CITES listing of teatfish. SPC Beche-de-mer Information Bulletin 39:76–78. Available from <http://purl.org/spc/digilib/doc/za2ia> Accessed 3 March 2020).
- FAO. 2019. Report of the Sixth FAO Expert Advisory Panel for the Assessment of Proposals to Amend Appendices I and II of CITES Concerning Commercially Exploited Aquatic Species, Rome, 21–25 January 2019. FAO Fisheries and Aquaculture Report No. 1255. Rome.
- France Inter. 2019. Des invités surprises et peut-être de petites avancées au G7. Available at: <https://www.franceinter.fr/emissions/le-journal-de-19h/le-journal-de-19h-26-aout-2019> (~11 minutes) (Accessed 19 September 2019).
- Le Marin. 2019. La CITES protège des requins, raies et concombres de mer. Available at: <https://lemarin.ouest-france.fr/secteurs-activites/environnement/34804-la-cites-protège-des-requins-raies-et-concombres-de-mer> (Accessed 19 September 2019).
- Robin des Bois. 2019. Concombres de mer : la CITES s'intéresse aux sans-grades. Available at: <http://www.robindesbois.org/concombres-de-mer-la-cites-sinteresse-aux-sans-grades/> (Accessed 19 September 2019).