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An update on the CITES process concerning marine aquarium fishes

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Background

1. Aquarium fisheries contribute to economies and livelihoods in the Pacific. As of 2019, the estimated annual free-on-board value of this trade was USD 7.4 million per year. The trade began in the 1970s in four nations³. Today, the trade operates in 11 nations, exporting both wild-caught and cultured fish, corals and invertebrates to private aquaria, mainly in the USA and Europe.
2. The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) is a multilateral environmental agreement. Its aim is to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten the survival of a species.
3. International trade of specimens is regulated by including or 'listing' certain species in the CITES Appendices. The species are grouped in the Appendices according to the degree of protection they need.
 - Appendix I includes species threatened with extinction. Commercial international trade is prohibited.
 - Appendix II includes species not necessarily threatened with extinction, but that may become so unless international trade is closely controlled. This Appendix also includes "look-alike species", which are species whose specimens in trade look like those of species listed for conservation reasons.
 - Appendix III includes species that are protected by at least one country which has asked other CITES Parties for assistance in controlling their trade.
4. Amendments to Appendices are adopted at the CITES 'Conference of the Parties' (CoP). CoP is a meeting of all Parties to CITES which takes place every two to three years and reviews the implementation of the Convention. The CoP discusses documents and reports from the Parties, the permanent Committees of CITES (Standing Committee, Animals Committee and Plants Committee) and the Secretariat.
5. Current CITES-listed species of note to the Pacific aquarium trade include most corals in the order Scleractinia, the Maori wrasse (*Cheilinus undulatus*), seahorses in the genus *Hippocampus* spp. and giant clams in the genera *Hippopus* spp. and *Tridacna* spp.. Many sharks and rays are also listed in the CITES Appendices, however these are mostly exported to large public aquaria. Species that are listed in the CITES Appendices can be found using this link <https://cites.org/eng/app/appendices.php> or in a searchable database using this link <https://checklist.cites.org/#/en>.
6. At its 18th meeting (CoP18, Geneva, 2019), the CITES Conference of the Parties adopted a set of Decisions on *Marine ornamental fishes*, including Decisions to "convene a technical workshop to consider the conservation priorities and management needs related to the trade in non-CITES listed marine ornamental fishes worldwide with a particular focus on data from importing and exporting countries" and report to the Animals Committee. The background documents for the workshop were

³ Gillett R., McCoy M.A., Bertram I., Kinch J., Desurmont A., Halford A. 2020. Aquarium products in the Pacific Islands: A review of the fisheries, management and trade. Noumea, New Caledonia: Pacific Community. 87 p.
https://www.spc.int/DigitalLibrary/Doc/FAME/Reports/Gillett_20_Aquarium_products.html

prepared, but due to funding and travel restriction related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the workshop was not able to be convened. At its 19th meeting (CoP19, Panama City, 2022), the Conference of Parties adopted another set of Decisions, including a Decision to convene the workshop. The technical international workshop on marine ornamental fishes took place in May 2024 in Brisbane, Australia, and is summarised in lines 8 to 13 of this information paper.

7. During the 16th SPC Heads of Fisheries meeting, concern was raised by members about the CITES discussions on marine aquarium fishes. A representative of SPC was requested to attend the technical workshop in May 2024 to represent the Pacific, and to report back to PICTs on the proceedings/outcomes.

Updates on the CITES process

The technical international workshop on marine ornamental fishes, May 2024

8. The “technical international workshop on marine ornamental fishes” took place in Brisbane, Australia from 7 to 10 May 2024.
9. The workshop discussed the conservation priorities and management needs related to the trade in non-CITES listed marine aquarium fishes worldwide. The workshop brought together members of the Animals Committee, representatives from range States, exporting and importing countries, fishery stakeholders, industry representatives and relevant intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations. The workshop was *not* intended to propose species for CITES listing or test species against CITES listing criteria.
10. The agenda items, documents, participant list, presentations and outcomes are on the CITES website⁴.
11. During the workshop, a catalogue of 2,192 species in trade was presented, a link to this list can be found in the footnotes⁵. Furthermore, several methods were presented by different stakeholders to identify which marine aquarium fishes from the list are most vulnerable to trade. Each approach differed.
12. SPC worked with Aquarium Fish Nouvelle Calédonie and the FAO to present on the status of aquarium fisheries in the Pacific and their importance to economies and livelihoods.⁶
13. The technical workshop resulted in observations and recommendations⁷ that were submitted to the 33rd meeting of the Animals Committee. The full list of recommendations and observations can be found in Annex I. Key points from the workshop proceedings are as follows:

⁴ <https://cites.org/eng/node/139057>

⁵ Catalogue of marine aquarium fishes in the global trade: https://cites.org/sites/default/files/documents/E-AC33-44-A4_2.xlsx

⁶ A copy of the presentation by SPC, FAO and Aquarium Fish Nouvelle Calédonie:

https://cites.org/sites/default/files/eng/prog/marine_ornamental_fishes/workshops/brisbane_052024/SPC_Pacific%20Marine%20Aquarium%20Fish.pdf

⁷ <https://cites.org/sites/default/files/documents/E-AC33-44-R2.pdf> (recommendations start on page 3)

- There was strong agreement and recognition of the importance of the aquarium trade to livelihoods, particularly in pacific island settings with limited livelihood options.
- A catalogue of all aquarium species in trade was compiled to be sent to the Animals Committee for consideration. This catalogue contains approximately 2,200 species.
- The workshop could not agree on one method that should be used to identify aquarium fishes that would be most vulnerable to international trade, although some methods such as “productivity susceptibility analysis” showed promising results.
- Several data fields were recommended to CITES Parties to consider recording through export monitoring programmes, these are outlined in Table 1. Most of these data fields are readily available through required commercial invoices established by operators while shipping live animals by air freight.

Table 1 data fields recommended to CITES Parties to record through export monitoring programmes.

| Data field | Explanation |
|-------------------|---|
| Species name | Genus and species (encouraged to use “Eschmeyer’s Catalog of Fishes” ⁸) |
| Common name | In any language (local names or English names) |
| Quantity | The number of specimens of each species in each shipment. No specific method was proposed. (not the weight of shipment or fish) |
| Country of origin | The country where the specimens were fished |
| Country of export | Where the specimens are being exported from |
| Country of import | Where the specimens are being exported to |
| Source | CITES source codes (W, R, F or C) |
| Import/export | Are these being imported, are they being exported or re-exported? |
| Date | Date of shipment |

⁸ Fricke, R., Eschmeyer, W. N. & Van der Laan, R. (eds) 2024. ESCHMEYER'S CATALOG OF FISHES: GENERA, SPECIES, REFERENCES. (<http://researcharchive.calacademy.org/research/ichthyology/catalog/fishcatmain.asp>). Electronic version accessed 10 Oct 2024.

Outcomes of the 33rd meeting of the Animals Committee, July 2024

14. The 33rd meeting of the Animals Committee took place in July 2024 in Geneva, Switzerland. The meeting was live streamed and recorded⁹. All documentation from the session on marine aquarium fishes can be found on the CITES website¹⁰.
15. Recommendations from the technical workshop that took place in May 2024 were submitted to the Animals Committee and the Animals Committee agreed to the recommendations.
16. Concerns were expressed about CITES meetings and processes being used to look at non CITES-listed species instead of focusing on those that are already listed in the CITES Appendices.
17. The Animals Committee also agreed to submit a set of draft decisions to CoP20¹¹. All of those directed to CITES Parties are as follows (note that these are not yet endorsed by the CoP):
 - “Parties are encouraged to inform the Secretariat of the development of any methods or analytical tools to support prioritisation of species of marine ornamental fishes which may warrant further research or other considerations, as appropriate.”
 - “Parties are invited, where possible, to implement the recommendations in paragraph 14 of document AC33 Doc. 44 (Rev 2), especially sub-paragraph f) on recording international trade data in marine ornamental fishes at the species level, and sub-paragraph u) on making use of FAO’s existing global fishery and aquaculture statistics databases to capture harvest and aquaculture data on marine ornamental fishes.”
 - “Parties are invited to review the catalogue of marine ornamental fish species in international trade identified by the workshop and presented in Annex 4 of document AC33 Doc. 44 (Rev. 2)¹², and identify species of high priority, which may warrant further research or other considerations as appropriate.”
18. It is worth reiterating here that the technical workshop on marine ornamental fishes in May 2024, Brisbane, was not organised with the intention to list any species or consider the listing of any species in CITES Appendices.

What next with CITES?

19. The next Conference of the Parties (CoP 20) will take place from 24 November to 5 December 2025 in Uzbekistan¹³. In the run up to this meeting, Parties to CITES will have an opportunity to submit proposals to amend the CITES Appendices, these proposals could list new species, remove species that are already listed or transfer species between the Appendices.
20. Proposals to amend the CITES Appendices I and II can be submitted by any Party to CITES and must be sent in at least 150 days before the CoP. Any proposal received for marine species will be immediately

⁹ https://www.youtube.com/live/jXLPS7V2hVvk?si=I9TXc_8T5rjPfcXF&t=7922

¹⁰ <https://cites.org/eng/ac/33/agenda-documents>

¹¹ <https://cites.org/sites/default/files/eng/com/ac/33/E-AC33-SR.pdf>

¹² https://cites.org/sites/default/files/documents/E-AC33-44-A4_2.xlsx

¹³ <https://cites.org/sites/default/files/notifications/E-Notif-2024-117.pdf>

communicated to Parties. The CITES Secretariat would also consult inter-governmental bodies who have a function related to the proposed species; this could include, for example, FAO or SPC.

21. Amendment proposals need to address a set of criteria to prove that the species should be listed under the proposed CITES Appendix. These criteria focus on whether a species is threatened with extinction according to the size of its population, its distribution, and whether there is a decline in the size of the wild population. For Appendix II, proposals should show that the population of the species is threatened with extinction (as per the above criteria) **unless** trade is regulated.¹⁴
22. The amendment proposals are then discussed during CoP and if not agreed by consensus, may be put to a vote. Proposals to amend the Appendices are adopted by a two-thirds majority of Parties present and voting.

What does this mean for the Pacific?

23. Although some species known to be traded in the Pacific were identified as vulnerable to fishing in the information documents submitted to the Animals Committee, it is unlikely that marine aquarium fishes traded in the Pacific will be proposed for listing in any CITES Appendices ahead of CoP20. This is mostly due to
 - the large number of aquarium fish species in trade,
 - the lack of agreement on how to identify which of the ~2,200 species in the catalogue are most vulnerable to the impacts of trade.
24. However, this is not to say that listing of aquarium fishes traded in the Pacific won't happen at all. Whether proposals to add species to Appendices I or II are submitted for marine aquarium species depends on how much of a priority member states give to these species, and the evidence available indicating that their trade could be harmful to their populations.

Recommendations and SPC support

25. Any argument that aquarium fishes in the Pacific are not impacted by trade must be evidenced. Currently, gaps in data and research limit the conclusions we can draw about impacts of harvest and trade. Therefore, we recommend that members:
 - Take note of the recommendations and observations in the May 2024 technical workshop and July 2024 Animals Committee meetings as summarised in points 13 and 17 of this information paper, and in Annex I.
26. Monitor marine aquarium fish exports, collecting the data fields recommended at the technical workshop (table 1), ensuring that *quantity* of species exported are recorded instead of their weight.
 - Make use of the already existing SPC exports module of the Coastal Fisheries Applications¹⁵ to store data concerning aquarium fish exports.

¹⁴ <https://cites.org/sites/default/files/documents/COP/19/resolution/E-Res-09-24-R17.pdf>

¹⁵ <https://www.spc.int/CoastalFisheries/>

- Complete drafting any aquarium fishery management plans that are currently being written, or review/update those that have expired.
- Note existing resources concerning best practices in exporting fishes for the aquarium trade i.e. Wabnitz and Nahacky, 2019¹⁶

27. To complement the above recommendations to members, SPC will:

- Support members in carrying out the above recommendations where support is requested formally to fame_support@spc.int
- Continue to monitor the CITES proceedings with regards to the marine aquarium fishes, giving updates to SPC member states as needed.
- Work to create in-depth country profiles of the aquarium trade across the Pacific, updating the Gillet et al. 2020 review¹⁷. This review would also include details on the contribution of the aquarium trade to livelihoods across the Pacific. Note that this research does not currently have funding; we are looking for opportunities so we can start this work.

¹⁶ https://www.spc.int/DigitalLibrary/Doc/FAME/Manuals/Wabnitz_19_best_practices_aquarium_trade.html

¹⁷ https://www.spc.int/DigitalLibrary/Doc/FAME/Reports/Gillett_20_Aquarium_products.html

Annex I – Recommendations from the marine ornamental fishes workshop in May 2024, Brisbane

28. The marine ornamental fishes workshop recommends that the Animals Committee agree to:

- note the outcomes of the international workshop on marine ornamental fishes, including the set of observations and recommendations;
- note that the workshop has identified a catalogue of over 2,000 species in international trade based on the various background documents prepared for the workshop;
- note that some background documents have presented different methods, used different datasets and identified species that may warrant further assessment related to the potential impacts of international trade;
- note that from this catalogue, some species may warrant further research and assessment;
- consider the catalogue of marine ornamental fish species in international trade identified by the workshop and consider any relevant vulnerability analyses of the species included in this catalogue;
- encourage Parties, where possible, to record international trade data in marine ornamental fishes at the species level and include the following data:
 - i. Species name: genus + species
 - ii. Common name: in any language (local names, English names, etc.)
 - iii. Quantity: number of specimens
 - iv. Country of origin: country of harvest
 - v. Country of export:
 - vi. Country of import:
 - vii. Source: CITES source codes (W, R, F or C)
 - viii. Import/Export: Is it import, export or re-export?
 - ix. Date: date of shipment;
- encourage Parties and stakeholders, where possible, to make marine ornamental fishes international trade data more accessible and consistent, and to share the trade data with researchers to help understand the scope and scale of the trade;
- invite Parties to consider Appendix III listings for nationally protected species that meet the criteria set out in Resolution Conf. 9.25 (Rev. CoP18) on Implementation of the Convention for species in Appendix III. Proponents should consult with other range States and consider application of the proposed listing across the species' range.

- invite Parties to consider using CITES and International Air Transport Association Guidelines on live animal transport for marine ornamental fishes in trade for transport nationally as well as internationally.
- encourage Parties to refer to IUCN Guidelines for Reintroductions and Other Conservation Translocations when considering releasing specimens of marine ornamental fishes into the wild;
- encourage Parties to consider entering into a mentoring arrangement with neighbouring Parties to develop best practices for management of and trade in marine ornamental fishes;
- encourage Parties, where possible, to involve indigenous peoples and local communities and encourage engagement by these communities in the development and implementation of management plans for marine ornamental fishes. In doing so, understand better the potential benefits of sustainable trade to species conservation and hence livelihoods over time.
- encourage Parties to involve all relevant stakeholders in the development and implementation of conservation and management plans for marine ornamental fishes;
- encourage Parties to share best practices on documenting international trade in marine ornamental fishes, including data collection, accessibility, evaluation and reporting;
- encourage Parties to share best practices on population monitoring and evaluation of management effectiveness for species of marine ornamental fishes;
- encourage Parties when developing management plans for marine ornamental fishes to consider an ecosystem approach, where appropriate, and include conservation elements;
- recommend that for future IUCN Red List Assessments of marine ornamental fishes, species not yet assessed and those where the assessments are older than 10 years are prioritised;
- invite exporting Parties to consider making use of the methodologies and adaptive management practices outlined in the CITES NDF guidance to ensure that international trade in non-CITES listed marine ornamental fish species is not detrimental to the species in the wild;
- note the following future research topics on marine ornamental fishes identified at the workshop:
 - i. The best analytical tools to support prioritisation of species (e.g. Productivity Sustainability Analysis or other vulnerability analyses, FishBase) to best direct efforts for stock assessments for those species that are highlighted as most potentially vulnerable.
 - ii. How to sustainably manage species in data poor MOF fisheries.
 - iii. Life history characteristics, including age at maturity, fecundity, pelagic larval duration, generation time of marine ornamental fishes.

- iv. The contribution of ex situ husbandry and captive breeding to management and recovery of wild populations (noting that this is highly species and context dependent) including nutritional needs.
 - v. The impact of shifting production systems on livelihoods.
 - vi. The best ways government resources can be allocated to fisheries management and harvest practices.
 - vii. Supply chains and traceability (technology, tools, production systems, benefit sharing in supply chain, mortality).
 - viii. Impact of management actions on populations and livelihoods (e.g. closures and restrictions, restocking, from ranching).
 - ix. Monitoring (e.g. remote sensing and Geographic Information System).
 - x. Emerging market trends, specifically East Asia.
 - xi. Age of extraction for ranching.
 - xii. Cyanide testing and the need for a tool for detection.
 - xiii. Impact of climate change.
 - xiv. Test to detect the use and understand the prevalence of destructive chemicals (e.g. cyanide, chlorine) and other chemicals used in harvest.
- encourage Parties to share nationally prohibited species list / domestic legislation on marine ornamental fishes to be included in existing databases such as FAOLEX, ReefLEX, CITES Lex and ECOLEX;
 - encourage Parties to make use of FAO's existing global fishery and aquaculture statistics databases to capture harvest and aquaculture data on marine ornamental fishes; and
 - encourage Parties to use the nomenclature in Eschmeyer's Catalogue of Fishes when recording international trade in non-CITES listed MOF species.
 - The workshop also noted the offer from the University of Leeds and Roger Williams University to run a Productivity Sustainability Analysis (PSA) on species from the catalogue in Annex 4, to share with the Animals Committee. If available in time, this analysis may be submitted as an information document to the present meeting.