

THE QUEEN CONCH OF THE US VIRGIN ISLANDS

The queen conch is a marvel. Her shell is a most versatile and beautiful thing—usually a rich milky pink inside, the exterior is spiked and sandy brown. Her meat is considered a delicacy. She produces rare pearls that have been used as jewelry for centuries. As a symbol of the emancipated slaves of the US Virgin Islands, the conch has even come to represent the most precious of all human rights—freedom. To top it all, when the queen is gone, her abandoned shell breathes new life as a horn used in religious ceremonies.

The US Virgin Islands owes much to the queen conch, historically and culturally. Its value to the people of the Virgin Islands is great.

Sadly, though, the queen conch is disappearing.



PHOTO BY ROBERT BUMANN

A SUSTAINING HARVEST

The conch is a valuable resource, but it is also a finite one. Over-harvesting of conch has been devastating. On land, farmers know that the earth can yield great things, but it must lie fallow from time to time in order to replenish itself.

Our ocean ecosystems—and the conchs that live in them—are no different. We cannot continue to take more and more expecting that they will continue to give to us forever. As stewards of the oceans, we need to foster sustainable conch harvests and allow the oceans to replenish.

If we don't, the queen conch may disappear forever.

THE CIRCLE OF LIFE BEGINS

Able to live 20 years or more, adult queen conchs reproduce annually in spawning rituals where the females lay egg strands onto the sand. After up to 2 months drifting in the water, the larvae settle in shallow flats. Juvenile conchs remain buried in the sandy sea bottom for an entire year before they emerge. At three to four years of age conchs are ready to reproduce.

READING LIPS

As a juvenile grows it secretes calcium carbonate onto its spiral shell. Once it reaches its maximal size the shell begins to form a flaring lip, which is the clearest indication of it having reached adulthood. Lip thickness is especially important to note because when conchs are harvested too young they haven't had a chance to reproduce and therefore, to rebuild the population.

PHOTO BY ROBERT BUMANN



- Juvenile
- Maturing
- Adult
- Old Adult



Lip thickness of adult conch is measured in the mid-lateral region of the shell lip with a caliper.

YOU CAN SAVE THE QUEEN CONCH

We all have a part to play in ensuring healthy conch populations in the US Virgin Islands. The VI Government has three conch management strategies that you can be part of:

1 Respect closed fisheries

Do not harvest or consume queen conch from July 1 to September 30 each year, the conch's peak reproductive period.

2 Catch only the largest conchs

Only harvest conch with shells measuring at least 9 inches and with flaring shell lips thicker than $\frac{3}{8}$ ths of an inch. This guarantees that juveniles (those with thinner lips) will grow to maturity and enter the reproductive phase of their lives.

3 Advocate for marine reserves

Work locally to have the government set aside areas where harvesting queen conch is prohibited outright, year-round. Here, conch can grow old and reproduce for many years. Such marine reserves ensure a solid base population and serve as benchmarks for evaluating and fine-tuning our management efforts.

Additionally, Federal law prohibits exportation of conch unless accompanied by a CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) export permit. You can support local and federal conch management measures by actively following the law and telling others to do the same.

With your help, and by following these simple guidelines, we can save the queen conch of the US Virgin Islands.

Established in 1972, The Ocean Conservancy is a non-profit organization whose mission is to protect ecosystems and conserve the global abundance and diversity of marine wildlife.

Through science-based advocacy, research, and public education, we inform, inspire and empower people to speak and act for the oceans. If you would like more information about The Ocean Conservancy and its other programs, visit www.oceanconservancy.org.

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Who'll Save The Queen?



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