THE TRADE IN MARINE ORNAMENTAL FISHES

PRO CORAL FISH

FONDATION FRANZ WEBER

CITES CoP18 Decision 18.296 directs the CITES Secretariat to **convene a 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"*. **As a result of the pandemic, it has not been possible to convene such a workshop**. At its last meeting, the Animals Committee decided that this workshop would need to be postponed, and they would instead consider the results of the workshop and make recommendations to CITES CoP20, i. e. **not before 2025**.

BACKGROUND

Almost all coral reef fishes are wild-caught, and few scientific analyses have attempted to elicit exact quantities and identify species involved. Most fishes originate from coral reefs in southeast Asia but also from the Caribbean. Few reproduce in captivity.

The multi-billion-dollar trade in marine ornamental fishes has rarely been reliably monitored.

The consequences of the removal of millions of these fishes are poorly understood. **It is almost impossible to analyse the trade in marine ornamental fishes due to a lack of data**, and available data for marine species is frequently combined with that for freshwater species.

There is an urgent need to introduce a specific harmonised system tariff code and for a global monitoring system in order to gather accurate and timely information on the number and species of marine ornamental fishes in commerce, where specimens originated, and whether they were wild-caught or captive-bred and analyse whether the trade is detrimental to certain species.

Figures range from 15 - 30 million coral reef fishes being traded annually but could be as high as 150 million specimens (Stevens et al., 2017), and mortality rates throughout the supply chain can be high (Cohen et al., 2013). The global value of this trade between the years 1976 - 1999 was estimated at between USD 28–40 million. It is likely that the value of the trade has increased significantly since then, reflecting ongoing extensive commercial activity of marine ornamental fishes.

Reef-building corals play a critical role in marine ecosystems and form the basis of coral reefs, which provide habitat and trophic support for one-third of all marine species (Reaka-Kula, 1997) and more than 600 million people depend directly on coral reefs for their survival (Spalding et al., 2017; Wilkinson, 2008). However, due to a combination of local and global influencing factors coral reefs are experiencing a significant loss of biodiversity, due in particular to climate change, but another important factor is the trade in marine ornamental fishes.

The IPCC Special Report (2018) predicts that with +1.5 °C warming, 90% of reef-building corals will have disappeared by 2100. This loss would be almost total with a 2°C increase (IPCC, 2018).

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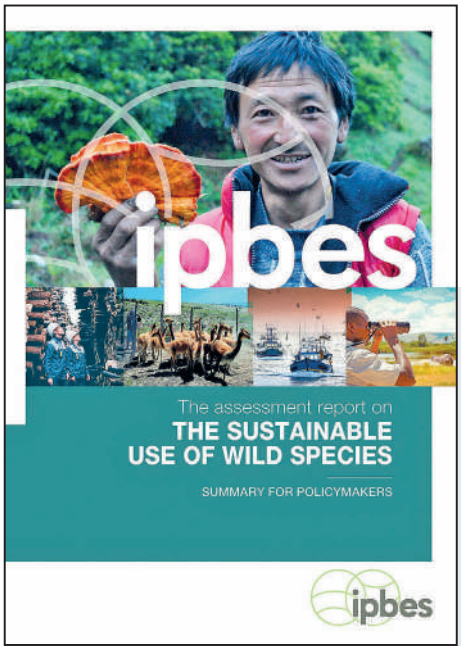
CITES CONTRIBUTION SO FAR

The EU, the US and Switzerland, submitted CoP18 Doc. 94 on 'conservation management of and trade in marine ornamental fishes' to CITES CoP18 in 2019 , with an aim to assess the trade in marine ornamental fishes. The recommendations proposed by this document were adopted by consensus and included in CoP18 Decisions 18.296-18.298.

CITES Secretariat acknowledges an enormous gap in knowledge about this century-old trade, with over 2,300 species currently traded.

However, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has not been possible to convene the workshop in time. At its last meeting, the Animals Committee therefore decided that these proceedings would need to be postponed. As a result **the analysis and recommendations of the Animals Committee will not be discussed until the 20th Conference of the Parties,** likely delaying this process for another four years (AC31 Sum. 3, page 13). The EU, the US and Switzerland would co-finance the work in scrutinising this trade (AC31, Doc. 36).

The likely negative consequences of such a delay on coral reefs are impossible to determine, as populations of coral reef fishes in the wild will continue to be impacted by the collection of specimens to supply the marine aquarium trade. **Over 50% of the world's coral reefs have died in the last 30 years** (Souter et al. 2021).



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RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the literature, the **main importing countries are the EU, the US** and Japan (Wabnitz et al., 2003), although there is **no information at all for Japan and other major economic or emerging markets, such as China or those located in South-east Asia, Africa, and Latin America** (Biondo & Calado, 2021).

The process decided at CoP18 is being delayed, due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic (No. 2021/030). However, the assessment of the trade in marine ornamental fishes and its potential detrimental effect on some species is urgent. **Immediate measures can be easily taken to adapt existing databases and strengthen the international monitoring of this trade**.

The European database (TRACES) and the US database (LEMIS) should therefore be adapted as per Biondo & Burki (2019, 2020) and Biondo & Calado (2021), as a matter of urgency.

We strongly recommend that the European Union and the United States of America immediately take the necessary steps to:

Adapt TRACES by:
- including all coral reef fish species according to fishbase.org and marinespecies.org for taxonomy (Today approx. 50% of species are listed);
- removing all genus and family names so that the selection can be made at the species level only;
- collecting data on the origin (place of capture); and
- establishing whether ornamental fishes are wild-caught or farmed (captive bred).

Adapt LEMIS by to incorporate more information on ornamental fishes by:
- incorporating all species of marine ornamental fishes at species level;
- collecting the number of specimens traded;
- recording the origin of the species; and
- stating if a specimen is wild-caught or farmed (bred in captivity).

These steps can be taken swiftly and independently of CITES decisions.

In fact, the European Parliament resolution of 5 October 2022 on the EU strategic objectives for this CITES conference 'urged the Commission to adapt the European TRACES database in order to collect and make publicly available accurate information on the species, volume and origin of all marine ornamental fish in trade and thus monitor this currently unregulated and often unsustainable trade for which the EU is a major import market.'