



PRESS ADVISORY

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VALUABLE MARINE SPECIES UP FOR GLOBAL TRADE PROTECTION

Fate of precious red coral and wild black caviar trade to be determined at international meeting; scientists and industry support stronger conservation measures

(June 4, 2007 - The Hague, The Netherlands) Delegates from 171 countries will debate over the next 10 days whether to include key marine species under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). At the triennial meeting of the Conference of the Parties (CoP), wild caviar trade regulations may be tightened, and red coral, the most valuable of all coral species, will be considered for a listing that would establish trade monitoring to ensure global demand does not threaten the species' survival.

With wild black caviar fetching more than U.S. \$100 an ounce and a finished red coral necklace retailing for up to \$20,000, these products are among the world's most valuable wildlife commodities. But 200-million-year-old sturgeon species, source of black caviar, have declined by up to 90 percent in the past 30 years, and global red coral catches have plummeted by 90 percent in the past two decades.

"It is a case in point of how the overwhelming popularity of luxury products from the sea can cause marine life populations to crash, sometimes to irreversible levels," said Dawn M. Martin, president of SeaWeb, an international NGO. "The CITES Conference of the Parties provides the only global venue to protect these vulnerable species from trade pressure. The international community has a chance to help put red coral and wild sturgeon on the road to recovery."

Red Coral, Too Precious to Wear

Red coral (scientific name: *Corallium* / AKA: pink coral) is a deep-sea animal that is threatened by climate change, overfishing and pollution.



Fished for more than 5,000 years, primarily as a material for jewelry and decorative objects, red coral has been marked by boom and bust cycles of discovery and overfishing. These cycles flood the global marketplace, depress prices, and lead to rapid exhaustion of the resource. Red coral today is mostly fished in the Mediterranean and western Pacific Ocean, for a total harvest of 50 metric tons, down 89 percent from the fisheries' peak of 445 metric tons in 1984.

The value of the trade is significant, with raw red coral selling for \$100 to \$900 per kilogram at auction. In 1999 alone, the Italian town of Torre del Greco reported red coral profits of \$174 million.

Support for Red Coral Protection

"Because of its value, global range, trade volume, and importance in the ecosystem, *Corallium* are among the important marine species being considered for a listing this year," said Dr. Elliot Norse, a scientist and director of the Marine Conservation Biology Institute. The United States, the world's largest documented consumer of red coral products with more than 26 million pieces imported from 2001 to 2006, proposed red coral for a CITES Appendix II listing after being petitioned by SeaWeb. Norse added, "For decades now, we've been loving red and pink coral to death. We must not let this happen."

The red coral listing is supported by the CITES Secretariat, TRAFFIC, WWF, the Marine Conservation Biology Institute, the Species Survival Network, and numerous scientists.

"Deep-sea corals such as *Corallium* are an important part of the ocean ecosystem," said Dr. Steve Cairns, research scientist and curator at the Smithsonian Institution. "Ocean life depends on them for protection from predators and as gathering places for mating. Other coral species, black and blue for example, are already listed on the CITES Appendix II. If any coral species deserves to be protected, it is *Corallium*, which is traded more heavily and is extremely vulnerable to overfishing pressure."

Concerns about overfishing are growing in the jewelry industry, prompting some, such as Tiffany & Co., to remove precious corals from their product lines.

Fernanda Kellogg, senior vice president of Tiffany & Co. and president of The Tiffany & Co. Foundation, said, "Tiffany & Co. is committed to obtaining precious materials in ways that are socially and environmentally responsible. With regard to coral, we believe that coral harvesting as currently practiced is not sustainable and threatens marine ecosystems. We will not use this precious material in our jewelry until harvesting methods have been adopted that ensure the sustainability of coral reefs. Tiffany urges international officials to support stronger protection for red corals so we can be assured of the survival of these precious gems from the sea."

Threat of Overfishing

The United States' proposal cites scientific evidence that commercial fishing has decreased the genetic diversity within and among populations, reduced colony densities, and shifted size and age structure to small, immature colonies that are worthless to the red coral trade and unproductive in the ecosystem. In the Pacific Ocean, the destructive fishing method of bottom trawling for red coral is the marine equivalent of clear cutting old-growth forests. There is evidence that coral populations never fully recover after being bottom-trawled, and entire beds of red coral have been depleted within five years of discovery.

Potential Result of Red Coral Listing

Appendix II refers to species that are in need of trade control so as to avoid over-exploitation. While some range states have taken steps to better manage their red coral fisheries, much of the fishing is conducted in international waters and there are no consistent global regulations or binding agreements between nations.

There are more than 20 species of *Corallium* but only seven are currently traded and would be affected by an Appendix II listing. If the listing is approved at the CoP, red coral producing and consuming nations would be required to maintain sustainable trade through an export-import permit system. This system would enable better monitoring of the trade by international officials and would encourage the development of fisheries' management plans at a domestic level. It is also possible that individuals could face a limit on how much red coral they could take out of a country. Otherwise, the listing would not directly result in trade restrictions or fishing limits, but would establish a venue through which future conservation measures could be adopted.

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