

Loved to death: Turks and Caicos' battle to save the queen conch

By Gemma Handy
Providenciales, Turks and Caicos
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BRILLIANT STUDIOS

From a staple food to its use as a musical instrument, few things epitomise the culture of the Turks and Caicos Islands (TCI) like the queen conch. And, for tourists, pulling up to a beachside restaurant to sample the freshly caught marine snail is a bucket list feature, the creature having been omnipresent in the islands' shallow translucent waters for centuries. Except, for several days in January, there were none to be found. Overfishing is being blamed for plummeting ocean stocks which saw conch off the menu at several restaurants across Providenciales. Fears are now rife that the beloved mollusc, which even appears on the British territory's coat of arms, is being loved to death.

National symbol

"Conch is a national symbol and a huge part of our heritage," explains TCI's former culture director David Bowen.



TCI DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE Conch blowing is part of TCI's cultural heritage

Mr Bowen blamed a lack of action from the government, which still permits conch to be exported, along with watersports operators who allow holidaymakers to take home live juvenile conchs as souvenirs.



BRILLIANT STUDIOS Conchs can be found in shallow waters

"They assume conch is unlimited but environmentalists have been warning about this for years," Mr Bowen added. Conch has at times been the islands' biggest export. Florida, which is just 600 miles (965km) away and which has itself banned conch fishing for decades due to its own shortages, is a prime customer. Turks and Caicos' annual conch exports have topped one million pounds (453,600kg) of meat in years past, equating to roughly 200,000 animals.

Something special

Many argue the practice is no longer sustainable. "Conch is a delicacy and should be preserved," said John Macdonald, owner of Da Conch Shack restaurant in Providenciales.



BRILLIANT STUDIOS

"People take it for granted but we believe it's something special to try, not to be eaten for every meal. If we'd stopped exports years ago we'd never have had these problems," he continued.

Mr Macdonald said the restaurant's sea-based crawls which catch wild conch had been empty for several days. Michael Stolow, owner of Bugaloos restaurant, told the BBC his fishermen were being forced to hunt further and for longer to find conch. He said the eatery was receiving several calls a day from hotel concierges inquiring if conch was on the menu.



COURTESY BUGALOOS RESTAURANT
Conch is a sought-after delicacy used in salads...



COURTESY BUGALOOS RESTAURANT
...and made into fritters

"Many tourists have already been to other restaurants and found none available, so now they're calling before they even get in the cab," he added. The shortage is echoed across the Caribbean with one study in neighbouring Bahamas suggesting the country could lose its conch industry entirely within a decade without urgent action. Last year, Jamaica implemented a ban on all conch fishing amid a dramatic decline in stocks.

Call for blanket ban

TCI does have an annual three-month "closed" season on exports but environmentalists say it falls far short of what is required.

Kathleen Wood, of research body SWA Environmental, has been calling for tighter controls for years and now thinks a blanket ban is the only way to save the species. "It's horrific that we've reached this stage. If fishing persists, it might be too late to do anything," she said. Conch's importance to Turks and Caicos dates back to the pre-Columbians who not only ate them but fashioned their shells into tools. Later, islanders used them as musical horns while the shells' beautiful pink colours have seen them displayed in jewellery for centuries.



ATELYS
Conch is also used to make colourful jewellery

There has even been a long-running festival devoted entirely to the meaty mollusc, featuring a host of innovative dishes and a lively "conch knocking" contest in which participants race to remove the creature from its shell.

The queen conch has been under the protection of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) since 1992 which offers some levels of protection regarding trade.

Under pressure

Conchs are particularly vulnerable to overexploitation, due to their slow mobility, habitat in shallow, accessible water, and slow growth and reproductive cycles.

By grazing on algae which can smother coral reefs, they play an important environmental role too.

But their numbers have to be at a certain density to enable them to reproduce, explained Chuck Hesse, who founded the islands' erstwhile Conch Farm in the 1980s.

"The female conch, like a cat, gives forth a pheromone to attract the males. If there are no males downstream to smell it, mating will never occur," he said.

Environment Minister Ralph Higgs acknowledged conchs were "under pressure".

He said measures being taken included reducing the number of fishing licences granted, along with slashing export quotas.

An ocean stock count is currently underway, after which final decisions will be made on carving a path forward, Mr Higgs added.

That cannot come soon enough for many islanders.

"Once conch have gone they don't come back; that's what's happened everywhere else," warned Mrs Woods, adding that Florida's long moratorium on conch harvesting had done little to bring numbers back to a commercially sustainable level.

"For Turks and Caicos, the biggest impact is the loss of an iconic cultural species. For a country to lose a piece of its national identity is tragic."

Turks and Caicos corals: Disease threatens barrier reef

By Gemma Handy
Providenciales, Turks and Caicos
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KANDI HARIRAJ

From the air, the turquoise hues of the Turks and Caicos Islands' vast barrier reef appear as an expanse of blistering beauty.

One of the largest reef systems on Earth, it teems with wildlife like friendly wild dolphins, and attracts more than a million tourists a year.

But underneath the water's stunning surface lurks a deadly disease, silently ravaging the corals which keep its denizens alive and protect the islands' pristine coastline from storms and erosion.

Stony coral tissue loss disease (SCTLD) has been dubbed the biggest threat facing the tiny British territory's marine environment, and the most virulent coral sickness the world has ever seen.

'Not coming back'

"This is a serious problem, if not a crisis," says Don Stark of local NGO the TC Reef Fund (TCRF). "We've already lost many coral heads - and they're not coming back."



DAVID STONE, TCRF

Don Stark warns that action needs to be taken soon before the damage becomes irreversible

It is not just these islands, 600 miles (965km) south-east of Miami, that are affected.

Since the disease first appeared off the Floridian coast in 2014, where it has now impacted 100,000 acres (40,500ha), it has made its way through the Caribbean into several countries including Jamaica, Belize, the US Virgin Islands and the Dominican Republic.

Its rapid-fire spread and high mortality rate have seen it wipe out some of the region's most important reef-building corals, sparking additional fears for tourism and those who rely on the ocean for a living.



TCRF

White lesions can be seen on this newly infected brain coral in West Caicos

Exacerbating concerns in Turks and Caicos is a long wait for the local government to grant the TCRF permission to begin intervention work.

More than 1,200 people recently signed a petition demanding the group be given the go-ahead to start administering antibiotics, a process which has seen success in Florida.

Mr Stark says the NGO has had equipment on the ground since September. The absence of a permit means it is powerless to do anything but "watch corals die".

Meanwhile, the disease has spread to four islands across the Turks and Caicos archipelago.

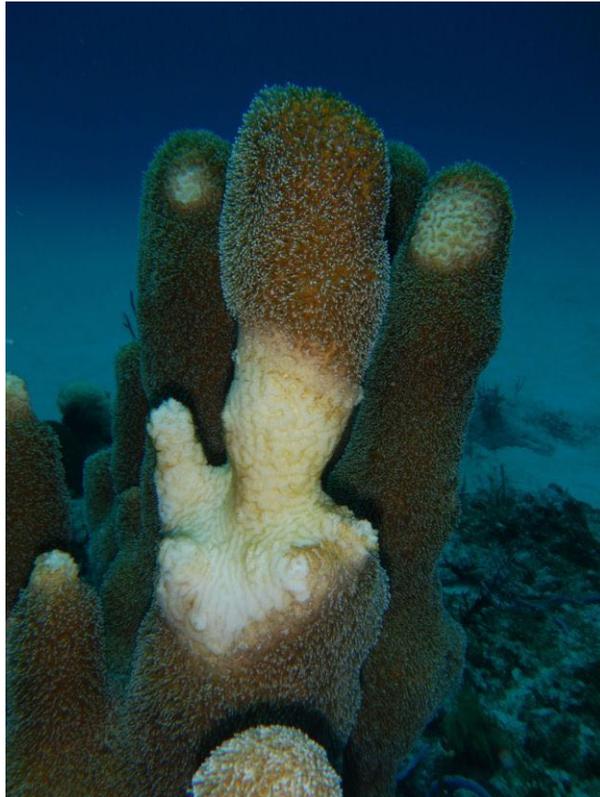
The disease is treatable but treatments are labour intensive, Mr Stark says. Urgent action is vital to "save the country's reefs from devastation before the damage is irreversible", he adds.

For its part, the government says it is "seriously weighing the best course of action". A spokesman said authorities were consulting international experts on the ramifications of putting antibiotics in the water.

'Potential disaster'

Scientists are still uncertain about the disease's exact cause, but it is thought to be due to bacteria, passed to other corals through direct contact and water circulation. Some suggest bilge water from passing freighters could be aggravating its spread in Turks and Caicos.

The malady typically appears as small patches of white exposed skeleton and is recognisable by its breakneck contagion, usually killing corals within weeks of them becoming infected.



TCRF
A pillar coral shows the typical signs of stony coral tissue disease

"It's a potential disaster," says TCRF's Alizee Zimmermann, who first spotted the ailment last year.

"My immediate thought was: something is wrong, the reef is sick. I could see live tissue peeling off. We don't know how it's being transmitted specifically, which makes it incredibly difficult to assess," she explains.

"It wasn't treated in Florida for some time because no-one knew what it was, and they've lost a huge percentage of their reef. But if the right measures are taken in a timely manner, we have a really good chance of slowing it down while scientists figure it out," Ms Zimmermann adds.

Karen Neely of Florida's Nova Southeastern University, which has been studying the disease, says it is "unprecedented" in terms of its reach and the number of coral species affected.

"Infection and mortality rates are extremely high. This disease moves quickly and can rapidly decimate reefs. In impacted regions, it has significantly changed coral cover, species composition, and ecosystem function," Ms Neely adds.

SCTLD poses additional concerns because it attacks many threatened species, such as the Caribbean's iconic but rare pillar coral, explains Judith Lang of the Atlantic and Gulf Rapid Reef Assessment (AGRRA) programme.

While certain coral varieties appear immune, the disease affects more than 20 others, some of which have taken centuries to grow.

Winter threat

Warmer waters associated with summer - and a trigger for coral bleaching - unexpectedly appeared to slow down SCTLD's spread in Florida, a pattern mirrored in the Turks and Caicos.



TCRF
Maze coral is among the affected species

Now temperatures have dipped again, contagion appears to be picking up speed, TCRF chiefs say. They fear they face a race against time to save the reef, widely considered one of the healthiest in the Caribbean.

Dive instructor and naturalist Lee Munson moved to the territory in 2012, seduced by its unspoilt environment.

While turtles, dolphins and vibrant fish still thrive, its waters are already under increasing pressure from pollutants and climate change-related warming, he warns.

"This disease is the new kid on the block and it's a big concern. We do everything we can, like sterilising dive equipment religiously so we don't spread it," he says.

"But if the reef becomes unhealthy and dull, then people will go elsewhere."

Mr Munson adds: "This is not like bleaching, which coral can recover from. It's final; once it's gone, it's gone."

