



NOAA Fisheries



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Caribbean Fishery Management Council

The Caribbean Fishery Management Council is charged with managing and conserving fishery resources in the US portion of the Caribbean. The Caribbean Council is unique in being the only regional council that does not include one of the fifty states in the Union in its management area. Its area of jurisdiction extends from nine nautical miles off the state waters of Puerto Rico, and three nautical miles off the territorial waters of the US Virgin Islands (St. Thomas/St. John and St. Croix).

Fisheries in the US Caribbean region include commercial and recreational fisheries targeting spiny lobsters, queen conch and other mollusks, and numerous species of fish associated with coral reefs. Commercial fisheries target these species using hooks, nets, traps, and diving gear. Recreational fisheries also target these same species using rod and reel and scuba dive gear. Over 230,000 recreational fishermen make more than 1.4 million fishing trips in the area each year. Some anglers fish from shore, while others fish from boats, of which there are a large number (over 53,000 recreational boats) in Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands. To date, the Council has developed fishery management plans for spiny lobster, reef fish, corals, and queen conch.

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Opportunities & Challenges

Managing for Sustainable and Viable Fisheries

The Council adopted a fishery management plan for spiny lobster in 1981. The plan controls the harvest level of spiny lobster to stop overfishing, ensure economic stability, improve data and understanding of the resource through biological and socioeconomic research, and reduce gear losses, destruction of habitat, death, and injuries to unharvested immature and adult lobsters. Management measures include a minimum size limit of 3.5 inches or greater carapace shell length, gear restrictions, and a prohibition on retaining egg-bearing female lobsters. Despite these measures, the landings, catch rates, and relative abundance of spiny lobsters have declined since the beginning of the fishery. The Council is working to improve enforcement and data collection for this fishery to improve the condition of the lobster resource in the region.

The shallow water reef fish management plan was implemented in 1985 and includes over 140 species of commonly landed reef fish. Of this group, the grouper and snapper fisheries are the most important fisheries in the region. The Council has used seasonal area closures to protect these species when and where they are most vulnerable during their spawning aggregations. The complexity of the reef fish fisheries, together with the high diversity of fish species caught on every trip, presents a difficult problem for scientists and managers. The Council will be challenged to develop annual catch limits, as required by the Magnuson-Stevens Act, for these species given limited catch, bycatch, and abundance information.

The Council's queen conch management plan includes management measures to protect egg-laying conch in both State and Federal waters, as well as minimum size limits on

conch that can be harvested. Conches are commercially and recreationally harvested by divers for their meat and attractive shells. Landings in Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands have fluctuated over the years, with increased catches in the 1990s. Catches of queen conch exceeded 300,000 pounds by 2000. The Council is working to stop overharvesting of queen conch and rebuild the species throughout its range.



The Council has also developed strict regulations to protect corals and coral reefs. Due to the critically important role of coral reefs in the sustainability of fish resources, and the increasing demand of reef fish organisms for the aquarium trade, the Council has prohibited all take of corals, live-rock, butterfly fish, seahorses, and juvenile red hind and mutton snapper in the region.



The spiny lobster fishery is another pan-Caribbean resource for which the Caribbean Council coordinates with other fishery management agencies and Caribbean countries to stop the downward trend of lobsters observed in some areas. The most recent adoption of a minimum size for spiny lobster imports into the United States is expected to help alleviate this problem given the US is the biggest buyer of Caribbean spiny lobster. The action was a coordinated effort with the Gulf and South Atlantic Councils, following discussions with other countries, and meetings with the Western Central Atlantic Fishery Commission of the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization.

International efforts to conserve Nassau grouper have been developed through a Nassau Grouper Initiative, which is an effort by the Caribbean Council and the Western Central Atlantic Fishery Commission to rebuild this species in those areas where the fishery is considered overfished. Although the fishery is still viable in some countries, the tendency is to deplete the grouper stock to very low levels unless measures, such as closures to protect the spawning aggregations, are taken to control the harvest of this resource. The Council will continue to actively participate in this effort to rebuild Nassau grouper.

