

**Status of Queen Conch (Strombus gigas)
Management in the Florida Keys, U.S.A.**

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ABSTRACT

In recent years the State of Florida managed queen conch harvest solely through use of a bag limit (10 conch per person per day). In 1984, the Florida Marine Fisheries Commission (FMFC) began review of queen conch fishery regulations. The Commission's process of producing management regulations is to hold a series of public hearings where they receive information from fishery biologists and testimony from the public.

To this end, the Florida Department of Natural Resources conducted a survey measuring queen conch throughout the Florida Keys. Habitats were primarily mixed rock rubble with algal growth and coarse sand overlain with Thalassia. More than 75% of all conch were juveniles. Although there was some variation between locations, data indicated that a minimum size of 225 mm (~8 5/8") from the tip of the spire to the end of the siphonal notch would protect nearly 50% of all flared lipped conchs in Florida. The smallest flared lipped conch observed was 200 mm (8") and the largest was 260 mm (10 1/4").

Based upon testimony from the public and from fishery scientists, the FMFC concluded that a dramatic decline in queen conch abundance, likely caused by overfishing, had occurred and recruitment overfishing may have been occurring in the fishery population. Most conch in the Florida Keys were harvested prior to reaching sexual maturity. However, some evidence indicated that stock recovery might be rapid. After being decimated by natural environmental perturbations, the conch population in the Dry Tortugas recovered in four years. This evidence led the FMFC to ban harvest of queen conch in Florida waters instead of instituting a minimum size and reduced bag limit. The ban is still in effect.