

CONVENTION ON INTERNATIONAL TRADE IN ENDANGERED SPECIES
OF WILD FAUNA AND FLORA



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SEAHORSE EXPLOITATION AND TRADE IN VIET NAM

This document has been submitted by the Secretariat on behalf of IUCN in relation to agenda item 29.2.¹

¹ *The geographical designations employed in this document do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the CITES Secretariat (or the United Nations Environment Programme) concerning the legal status of any country, territory, or area, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. The responsibility for the contents of the document rests exclusively with its author.*

This analysis is being presented to the 70th meeting of the CITES Standing Committee (SC70) to contribute to agenda items Review of Significant Trade in Specimens of Appendix-II Species. This Information Document (Inf Doc) serves to inform the CITES Secretariat and CITES Parties of a recent investigation into the fisheries and trades of seahorses (*Hippocampus* spp.) in Viet Nam. Viet Nam currently faces a CITES recommended trade suspension for one seahorse species, *H. kuda*, as a result of the CITES Review of Significant Trade (RST). This suspension will be reviewed at SC70.

Through the CITES RST, CITES issued Viet Nam with formal recommendations to address its challenges in securing sustainable exports in *H. kuda* (AC26 WG7 Doc.1 (Rev. 1)). Viet Nam failed to meet the recommendation deadlines, leading CITES to recommend a trade suspension for *H. kuda* from Viet Nam in May 2013 (at SC63). This was the first global export ban ever imposed on any country for any marine fish species under any agreement. Export bans are undesirable – they drive the trade underground and/or deprive law-abiding fishers and traders of income.

More recently, at AC29, CITES Parties expressed formal concerns that commercial culture operations in Viet Nam may not account for the export volumes reported to CITES. CITES thus included Viet Nam in the new CITES mechanism, Resolution Conf. 17.7 because of (1) the lack of sustainability assessments for wild broodstock, and (2) the unreliability of declared production of source code-F *H. comes* by commercial culture operations in Viet Nam. Viet Nam’s response was reviewed at AC30 (in July 2018) and the Party was issued a formal recommendation to “confirm that if export of specimens recommence from these or similar facilities it will export specimens from these facilities with source code “W” or “F” and will make legal acquisition and non-detriment findings prior to authorising export” (AC30 Com. 7 (Rev. by Sec.)).

The CITES Secretariat and the CITES Authorities in Viet Nam both asked Project Seahorse, acting as the IUCN SSC Seahorse, Pipefish and Stickleback Specialist Group (<https://iucn-seahorse.org/>), to help support Viet Nam to make the changes needed to achieve sustainable exports of seahorses. Such changes would also end the ban on *H. kuda*, restoring populations, legal trade and livelihoods, while demonstrating that CITES can be an effective tool for fish conservation and fisheries sustainability.

To this end, Project Seahorse secured the funding to carry out a vital national assessment of seahorse fisheries and trade. Such work would allow national authorities to (i) evaluate change since the late 1990s, (ii) set a new baseline for ongoing monitoring, and (iii) develop a targeted management response to unsustainable exports.

We here present the abstract for the report: Foster, S.J., Aylesworth, L., Do, H.H., Bat, N.K., and Vincent, A.C.J. 2017. Seahorse exploitation and trade in Viet Nam. *Fisheries Centre Research Reports* 25(2):50pp.

The complete report (in English) can be found here:
<http://fisheries.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2017/11/Final-FCRR-25-2-Withcover-2017-1121.pdf>

Abstract:

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of wild Fauna and Flora decided to implement export controls for all seahorses (*Hippocampus* spp.) in 2002, the first such controls for any marine fishes. Viet Nam had difficulties implementing CITES regulations and was eventually subject to an export trade suspension in 2013. To help address gaps in knowledge and capacity, we gathered information on the biology, fisheries, aquaculture and trade of seahorses in Viet Nam, conducting 146 interviews in eight provinces.

Fishers reported catching seahorses from seven different types of fishing gear with two-thirds of the respondents reporting use of single trawls. Some divers and single trawls reported targeting seahorses directly, but most catch was incidental. Mean catch varied among gear types from fewer than one seahorse per day per seine net, to as high as 15 seahorses per day per pair trawler. The southernmost province, Kien Giang, obtained 85% of the total national catch estimate of about ~16.7 million individual seahorses per annum. The large number of vessels means that pair trawls land approximately 12.5 million seahorses per annum (75% of Viet Nam's total catch), four times more than single trawls (around 20%).

Landed seahorses enter a complex trade, with large domestic consumption of seahorses in Viet Nam for seahorse wine and tonics and considerable export; we could not discern the ratios that enter each. The reported purchase volume of dry seahorses was more than three times that of wet seahorses, with buyers in Kien Giang purchasing the largest number of seahorses per annum. Five different seahorse species were identified in trade with *Hippocampus trimaculatus* comprising nearly two-thirds of specimens surveyed from seahorse buyers.

Seahorses born in captivity to wild parents – and traded live – made up 90% of reported wild exports in the CITES database for 2008-2014. Aquaculture facilities, all focused on *H. kuda*, reportedly struggled to close the life cycle on breeding – thus retaining dependence on wild broodstock, obtained from fishers – and extracted food for their seahorses from the wild. According to CITES data, two-thirds of live trade from 2005-2014 apparently went to the USA and 11% to France.

Ninety-five percent of fishers from all provinces reported a decline in seahorse CPUE over a ten-year period with a mean 59% decline. Most fishers also reported inferred decline in body height (down 44%) and an increase in price of seahorses over the same time period (up 42%). A minority of buyers and two culturists also reported declines in supply.

Given that seahorses are pioneers in implementation of CITES for marine fishes, our work is of broad importance. We indicate that Viet Nam is not fully implementing CITES regulations: none of the seahorse catch was being monitored or regulated to any extent to assess sustainability; large exports of dried seahorses were either exported illegally without CITES permits or exported with permits that Viet Nam did not report to CITES; and the purported switch in exports of cultured seahorses from *H. kuda* to *H. comes* after CITES banned exports of the former in 2013 needs probing.