

Conch shell souvenirs require a permit for exportation

Friday, December 27th, 2013 The San Pedro Sun



Conch shell souvenirs are in abundance in Belize and they are among some of the most beautiful keepsakes found at local artisan booths and gift shops on Ambergris Caye. These souvenirs are purchased by hundreds of tourists who want to take a piece of Belize's craft pieces back home. However, they face the possibility of having their conch shell souvenirs confiscated by Customs Officers because of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) regulation. Recently, tourists have been complaining that their conch shell souvenirs are being confiscated at Phillip S. W. Goldson International Airport upon leaving Belize. According to the complaints, upon leaving the Belize Phillip SW Goldson International Airport in Belize, visitor's conch shell souvenirs have been taken away.

The Supervisor of the Conservation Compliance Unit in the Ministry of Fisheries, Hampton Gamboa, claims he was unaware of the issue. "I did not realize that Customs Officers were actually confiscating these conch shell souvenirs. We have not received any of those confiscated items and the procedure is that if any fishery item confiscated should be handed over to the Fisheries Department. As far as I am concerned, that has not been the case as of recent," explained a surprised Gamboa. He said that they will be following up with the Customs and Excise Department.



But the reality is that conch falls under the CITES regulation and is a commercially threatened species. Because of this recognition, the United States of America (USA) proposed that the Queen Conch (*Strombus Gigas*) be listed in Appendix II CITES since 1992. Since then queen conch became the first large-scale fisheries product to be regulated by CITES. This includes any part of the conch, including souvenirs and trinkets made out of its shell.



Gamboa said that because of the CITES regulations, tourists are required to have a special permit to export conch shell products. “Tourists should be told about the CITES regulations. A part of

the blame falls upon the Ministry of Fisheries because we need to do more to educate our artisans and art vendors. But part of the onus also falls on the vendors who know about this regulation and still sell these items to our tourists without telling them about the CITES regulation. They should tell our tourists that a special permit is required when exporting conch shell souvenirs. We know it is unfair and we are working to address this problem,” said Gamboa. A special permit only costs \$5 and can be obtained at the Fisheries Department office in Belize City. But applying for such permit requires travelling and time which is not something tourists may necessarily want to be going through for a simple souvenir. Gamboa said that starting January 2014, Fisheries Officers will be present at all point of entries in Belize, including the international airport. One of the things they hope is that such permits can be granted at the points of entry, making it easier for tourists.

The Ministry of Fisheries also took the opportunity to inform the public that if they intend to export seafood for personal consumption, a permit is also required. The permit costs \$5 and the procedure is simple and quick.