

Strasbourg 12 September 2000
[tpvs2000\tpvs43e_2000]

T-PVS (2000) 43

CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE AND NATURAL HABITATS

Standing Committee

20th meeting
Strasbourg, 27 November - 1 December 2000

POSSIBLE NEW FILE

Exploitation and commerce of *Lithophaga lithophaga* in Spain

*Report by
the Directorate of Nature Conservation (Ministry of Environment)
of Spain*

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Madrid, 23 August 2000.

In relation with your letter of 20 June 2000, about the situation of the Date-shell (*Litophaga litophaga*) in Spain, I have much pleasure in informing you that the General Directorate of Nature Conservation has carried out a research report on the biology, conservation and protection problems of the species in Spain, to answer the necessity of current information. In this report the following objectives have been analyzed:

1. To make a synthesis of the available data on the biological and ecological aspects of this species, which is considered basic to develop the following objectives, as well as for the development of any action that we decide to adopt about it.
2. To explain the ecological impact due to the exploitation of this species on their own populations and the ecosystem.
3. To analyze the characteristics and sociocultural and environmental circumstances of the capture and trade of Date-shells within the context of the Spanish shellfishing activity, keeping in mind the historical evolution of this activity, as well as the recent legal protection of *L. lithophaga*.
4. To analyze the protection normative of *L. lithophaga* that exists in the Spanish juridical legislation, the application problems and possible juridical conflicts, the interpretation of the exceptions to the protection of this species and the juridical consequences of their nonfulfillment, keeping in mind their adaptation for the conservation of this species and their habitat in the Spanish territory.
5. To formulate concrete proposals for the conservation of *L. lithophaga* and their habitat in Spain, specially juridical, management, surveillance and environmental education measures that Public Governments can carry out.

The outcome of this report (a small summary is attached) will be presented in the next meeting of the Standing Committee of the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (Bern Convention), which is to be held in Strasbourg from 27 November to 1 December 2000.

On the other hand, we have established all possible actions to avoid the trade of the species, through several contacts with the affected Regional Governments and the General Secretary of Marine Fishing of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fishing and Food, so we hope to solve the problem detected shortly.

El Jefe de Área de Acciones de Conservación,
P.A.
Javier Pantoja
Técnico de Acciones de Conservación.

BIOLOGY, CONSERVATION AND PROTECTION PROBLEMS OF DATE-SHELL (*Lithophaga lithophaga*) IN SPAIN **Summary**

The date-shell *Lithophaga lithophaga*, is a bivalve of the family *Mytilidae* which lives in the whole Mediterranean and east Atlantic coast, from the south of Portugal to Angola. It has also been mentioned in the Red Sea. In Spain, the species is frequent in all Mediterranean coast and Canary Islands. *L. lithophaga* lives in holes in limestone substrate, mainly of oolitic origin, usually between 0 and 25 meters of depth.

This is a boring species which penetrates into the substrate by a special chemical boring mechanism of pallial gland, its rate of growth is extraordinarily slow, its longevity is very high (can living more than 50 years) and it has a high fecundity and dispersion capacity.

It is a very appreciated species for human consumption in some areas of the mediterranean coast for whose capture the destruction of the rocky bottoms where it lives is required. Their overexploitation has caused important local ecological damages, mainly in some areas of the Italian and former-Yugoslavian coast. This has determined that it was proposed in several international forums as species that should be protected. As a result, it was included in Annex IV of Directive 92/43/EEC (Habitats Directive), in Annex II of Bern Convention and in Annex II of Barcelona Convention.

While in Italy and former-Yugoslavia the species has been exploiting to great scale and capturing by pneumatic hammers, in other countries like Greece, Albania or Spain, the extractive activity of this marine resource has kept, unless exceptions, with traditional methods (pickaxes, hammers, chisels and pincers). In recent years this species has begun to be exploited in Morocco and by means of destructive methods (pneumatic hammers and explosives).

The situation of the exploitation and consumption of *L. lithophaga* in Spain doesn't seem to have changed with the strict protection of the species since 29/12/1995 (adaptation of Spanish legislation to the Habitats Directive). The capture, trade and consumption of *L. lithophaga* are widely extended in the Spanish Mediterranean coast,

although in an unequal way. While this activity has a great importance and tradition in the Balearic Archipelago (mainly in Mallorca and Menorca) and in the coasts of south Catalunya and the whole province of Castellón, in the rest of the coastal areas it is carried out to smaller scale. In many cases, the date-shells that are extracted in the coast of Andalucía and Murcia are sold in Catalunya or Castellón. Also has been detected an smuggling of important amounts of this marine resource from Morocco toward the areas before mentioned. In the Canary Islands, Ceuta and Melilla, although the species is present, neither it is captured nor it wastes away, usually at least.

The shellfishing and fishing legal rules are not effective to eradicate this situation, because in fact this dispositions are for management of fishing and shellfishing resources, while *L. lithophaga* is not already a fishing or shellfish resource, but a species strictly protected by the environmental regulations for biodiversity conservation.

The legal protection of *L. lithophaga* that Habitats Directive contemplates has hardly had application to denounce and to sanction the illicit exploitation of this species, while in Spanish Regions where some protection type exists by means of shellfishing or fishing legal rules, this rules of fishing sector are applied and not those of biodiversity protection and conservation.

Finally, the proposals for an effective protection of *L. Litophaga* in Spain are:

- 1) To include *Litophaga litophaga* in the National Catalogue of Threatened Species, in the category “special interest”.
- 2) To urge to the Regional Governments to prohibit expressly in its normative of fishing and shellfishing the capture, trade and consumption of this species in its respective territories and that the corresponding Regional Departments for Environment assume its protection and conservation.
- 3) To develop an investigation program on the distribution and biology of the species in our coasts.
- 4) To develop a conservation and sustainable development Strategy for this species and its habitat.
- 5) To develop a program of environmental education and social awareness about the necessity of protect *L. lithophaga* and its habitat in the whole Spanish territory.
- 6) To enforce the regulations about the conservation and protection of the species (surveillance and control).