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CCSBT Ecologically Related Species Working Group Convenes in Kaohsiung

The sixth meeting of the Ecologically Related Species Working Group (ERSWG 6) of the Commission for the Conservation of Southern Bluefin Tuna (CCSBT) took place from February 20 to 23, 2006 in Kaohsiung, south Taiwan. The meeting aimed primarily to provide information and advice on issues relating to species (both fish and non-fish) which may be affected by southern bluefin tuna (SBT) fishery. According to the Fisheries Administration (FA) of the Council of Agriculture, important data was collected and exchanged, enabling those present to assess trends in tuna resources and other marine species. In addition to representatives from Taiwan, delegates from five other nations, including Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and South Korea, attended ERSWG 6.

Representatives from the Association for Albatross and Petrel Conservation were also present as observers. In total, around 50 people attended the meeting.

Southern bluefin tuna fishery is conducted mainly in the higher latitudes of the southern hemisphere; therefore, its main bycatch species are seabirds and sharks, according to the FA. By contrast, cetaceans, sea turtles and other species are rarely caught accidentally. Accordingly, current international research has focused primarily on the impact of SBT fishery on seabirds. This research has shown that the most effective methods of reducing accidental bycatch of seabirds are the use of streamer lines, the setting of longlines at night, the use of blue-dyed bait, employing line-setting machines with properly weighted branch lines to ensure that baited hooks sink more quickly, and others. In particular, it was found that the implementation of multiple seabird bycatch mitigation methods (for instance, the

INTERNATIONAL CONSERVATION NEWSLETTER

simultaneous use of dyed bait and streamer lines to discourage birds from scavenging baits during longline deployment) was more effective than the use of any one single method.

In order to reduce the impact of southern bluefin tuna fishery on other ecologically related species, Taiwan has already adopted several of the methods recommended for seabird bycatch mitigation. For instance, all vessels engaged in SBT fishery are required by law to employ streamer lines, scientific observers are positioned to help collate related bycatch data and to collect species samples, educational pamphlets on ways to reduce bycatch are printed and disseminated, and experts are invited to go abroad to major fishery

bases to increase Taiwanese fishermen's knowledge about how to reduce bycatch of other species. In the future, the government will also increase research in this area to establish prevention methods that meet the unique characteristics of Taiwan's fishery industry and ensure that measures are implemented by Taiwanese fishermen.

The Fisheries Administration called on Taiwan's fishermen to utilize and strengthen the seabird bycatch prevention methods currently available and to provide accidental seabird bycatch statistics to the relevant authorities for research purposes. By adopting the measures, fishermen would not only prevent losses caused by the consumption of fish bait by seabirds, but they would also ensure the survival of precious seabird species, helping Taiwan attain its goal of the sustainable coexistence of fishery and seabirds.

The Commission for the Conservation of Southern Bluefin Tuna came into being in 1993 after it became apparent that SBT stock was at a level where management and conservation were required. The Commission's objective is to ensure, through appropriate management, the conservation and optimum utilization of the global SBT fishery. The Commission also provides an internationally recognized forum for other countries/entities to actively participate in SBT issues. In 1995 the CCSBT

INSIDE

- **CCSBT Ecologically Related Species Working Group Convenes in Kaohsiung**
- **June Begins Ban on Giant Clam Collection in Penghu**
- **Smuggled Protected Orchids Seized at CKS Airport**
- **Turtle Smuggling Uncovered in Kinmen**
- **COA Draft Regulations for the Encouragement of Land Donation**

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INTERNATIONAL CONSERVATION NEWSLETTER

created an Ecologically Related Species Working Group to advise it on matters related to these species.



June Begins Ban on Giant Clam Collection in Penghu

To protect giant clam populations in the seas around the Penghu islands (the Pescadores), the local government has ordered a total ban on the harvesting of all giant clam species (*Tridacnidae* spp.) starting from June 1, 2006. Anyone found guilty of flouting the ban, which was ratified by the Council of Agriculture, Executive Yuan, will be subject to fines and punishments under the Fisheries Act, according to Mr. Hu Liu-tsung, Director-General of the Agriculture and Fisheries Bureau of the Penghu County Government.

Giant clams of the genus *Tridacna* have long been collected for the high commercial value of their meat and for aquarium or curio value. High demand has resulted in the accelerated stripping of giant clams from reefs in Penghu. To protect the species, the ban will work alongside existing protection measures. These include a project to build an aquaculture breeding farm, which will accelerate propagation and repopulation of giant clams and other species. Individuals will then be

relocated to suitable areas where they will be managed by local administrative units.

The largest bivalve mollusks in the world, giant clams are known in Chinese as ‘roses of the sea’ on account of their unique physical appearance and the exquisite coloration of the flesh or ‘mantle’. Listed as ‘vulnerable’ by the IUCN, all species of giant clam have appeared in Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), since the 1980’s, due to a sharp decline in wild populations as a result of extensive overharvesting for food and the aquarium trade. In other words, a license or permit must be obtained before they can be exported.

In an effort to protect this valuable marine resource, Penghu County Government officials proposed the prohibition measures for giant clam collection outlined in the Fisheries Act and relevant regulations, and requested permission from central government to put a total ban into effect starting from June 1, 2006, after considering the opinions of conservationists and local people.

According to data provided by Dr. Jeng Ming-shiou of the Research Center for Biodiversity, Academia Sinica, there are currently only nine recorded species of giant clams in two genera, *Tridacna* and *Hippopus*,

INTERNATIONAL CONSERVATION NEWSLETTER

throughout the world. The two species most commonly seen in the marine area surrounding Penghu County are the Small giant clam or Maxima clam (*Tridacna maxima* (Roeding, 1798)) and the Squamosa clam or Fluted giant clam (*Tridacna squamosa* (Lamarck, 1819)). Of these, populations of *Tridacna maxima* are more abundant.

Because adult giant clams are completely sessile, unable to move from their position on the coral reef, and they grow only very slowly—about two to three centimeters a year, according to records—their large-scale collection has caused populations to plummet drastically and their size to become smaller. Giant clams are often used as indicator species to measure the overall health of coral reefs, so they are particularly important to the ocean ecosystem. To preserve the biological diversity of marine species in Penghu, researchers are currently studying the use of artificial techniques to breed and repopulate certain species, including giant clams, with some success.

According to published research, giant clam shells are oval in shape and can reach up to 130 cm in length. The heavy shell is coarsely fluted with radial ribs and larger fluted scales. At 35 to 40 cm in length, the Small giant clam (*T. maxima*) is less than one third of the size of a true giant clam (*Tridacna gigas*). When viewed

from above, each of the two valves that form *T. maxima*'s shell has four to five inward facing triangular projections, rather like the five fingers of a hand, giving it the local name 'five-claw clam'.

Giant clams are found living on the surface of reefs, in sand, or embedded in coral. They occupy well-lit areas, due to their symbiotic relationship with photosynthetic algae, which require sunlight for energy production. The pigmentation of the mantle is caused by iridophores—pigment cells that are thought to protect the clam from the effects of intense light. The pigmentation changes according to how much light the clam requires for the algae that inhabit it and provide it with nutrients. The algae also provide the mantle with variety of colorations and markings, giving the giant clam its alternative name of 'rose of the sea'. The adductor muscles, which cause the shell to close, are a prized source of food. The meat, called himejako in Japan, is considered a delicacy.

Although, neighboring Southeast Asian nations also previously engaged in extensive harvesting of giant clams, many have now clearly ordered limitations on collection and other protection measures. In line with this, the Penghu County Government has also announced its own prohibition on the collection, processing, trade and holding of

INTERNATIONAL CONSERVATION NEWSLETTER

giant clams under the Fisheries Act and other relevant legislation. The period up until May 31, 2006 will be listed as a preliminary promotional period, when it is hoped that fishermen will comply with the new government policy and help promote the ban. At the same time, the Penghu County Fish Breeding Propagation Station will strengthen efforts to breed giant clams. The repopulated clams will be moved into suitable marine areas, where they will be managed by village and local administrative units. It is hoped that this will benefit the development of sustainable eco-tourism in the region, thus increasing the economic value of giant clams to the local people.



Smuggled Protected Orchids Seized at CKS Airport

On March 9, 2006, Taiwan customs inspection officials at Chiang Kai-shek International Airport uncovered the first ever attempt to smuggle globally-endangered slipper orchids (*Paphiopedilum* spp.) into Taiwan. A total of 289 slipper orchids were illegally imported, ostensibly for 'ornamental' purposes, from Surabaya in Java, Indonesia in a shipment with ant plants (*Myrmecodia* sp.) carrying soil and insects, Staghorn ferns (*Platyserium*

bifurcatum) and more than 600 other unidentified species of flora. The black market price of one wild or new species of slipper orchid is currently around NT\$80,000 to NT\$90,000, but can reach upwards of NT\$100,000 per stand; however, unlawful collection has already pushed many rare and beautiful slipper orchid species to extinction or near extinction.

According to customs information, the purpose listed for the shipment from Surabaya was 'ornamental'. When the shipment arrived at CKS International Airport on March 5, however, customs officials inspecting it became suspicious and ordered the container to be opened for further investigation.

An inventory of the shipment's contents revealed a total of 1,152 plants. Taipei Customs Office Mobile Inspection Brigade Chief Mr. Lan Cheh-tsung said that, after notifying inspection personnel from the Hsinchu branch of the Bureau of Animal and Plant Health Inspection and Quarantine (BAPHIQ) of the Council of Agriculture to help identify the plants, officials discovered 289 CITES-protected slipper orchids, as well as five ant plants, 171 staghorn ferns and more than 600 unidentified orchids and other plant species.

Lady's slipper or slipper orchid is a term used to describe orchids in the subfamily

INTERNATIONAL CONSERVATION NEWSLETTER

Cypripedioidea, which include the genera *Cypripedium*, *Mexipedium*, *Paphiopedilum*, *Phragmipedium* and *Selenipedium*, distinguished by their slipper-shaped pouches. Also known as ‘moccasin flowers’ in the United States, slipper orchids are listed on Appendix I of CITES, which bans all international trade of wild-collected species. The discovery of 289 rare slipper orchids being smuggled into Taiwan in just one shipment by customs officials at CKS Airport has shocked plant specialists at Taiwan’s Academia Sinica and has brought the case to the attention of orchid fanciers around the world.

However, plant experts pointed out that not every slipper orchid can command a price in the NT\$100,000 range. In Taiwan, most native slipper orchids can be propagated artificially, so the orchids found in flower markets are not wild specimens and are not subject to the same restrictions as protected wild specimens. One cultivated slipper orchid costs just NT\$300.

In addition to jeopardizing the survival of Asia’s rare slipper orchids, the importer’s careless actions risked destroying Taiwan’s native ecosystem by importing ant plants, carrying soil and insects, along with the orchids. The smuggled slipper orchids have been sent to a plant propagation station in Taiwan for further research, while the other

plant species will be destroyed according to epidemic prevention regulations. Meanwhile, an investigation has begun to track down and prosecute the importer under the relevant laws.



Turtle Smuggling Uncovered in Kinmen

On March 16, 2006, the Kinmen patrol of the Coast Guard Administration (CGA), seized a Chinese sampan in waters north of Kinmen suspected of illegally smuggling turtles and eggs from Taiwan to China. On board the vessel, investigators found an incredible 63,000 turtle eggs and 274 live turtles headed for China—a record number in recent years. Of the turtles found on the ship, at least one was suspected of being a protected wildlife species, the Yellow pond turtle (*Mauremys mutica*). Two mainland fishermen from Xiamen in Fujian Province, southwest China were taken into custody by the Kinmen District Prosecutors’ Office to face charges under the National Security Act and the Wildlife Conservation Act.

In the early hours of March 16, members of the Kinmen Reconnaissance Brigade received notification from the 12th Patrol Area of the Coast Guard Administration that radar had recorded a vessel in the marine area just off

INTERNATIONAL CONSERVATION NEWSLETTER

Hsiyuan in northeastern Kinmen suspected of conducting illegal activity. Patrol boat PP-2027, which was already in the area on another mission, rushed to the scene to investigate. When they arrived, patrolmen found 15 cardboard boxes of turtle eggs and a large number of plastic net bags of live turtles stashed away inside the sampan's hold.

After counting the find, investigators found that the catch included around 63,000 turtle eggs, weighing 330 kilos, and 274 live turtles, weighing 300 kilos, making this the largest haul of both turtle eggs and turtles uncovered in recent years. Most of the turtles were Chinese stripe-necked turtles (*Ocadia sinensis*) and Red eared sliders (*Trachemys scripta elegans*), but at least one was identified as possibly being a protected Yellow pond turtle.

Kinmen Coastal Patrol Chief, Mr. Weng Hsin-chi said that the turtles and eggs were being smuggled from Kinmen to mainland China, where some people eat turtles in medicinal stews. He said that the eggs and turtles had most likely been brought to Kinmen from Taiwan in preparation for smuggling across the Taiwan Strait to China where Taiwanese businessmen would most likely rear them or sell them directly for consumption. At present, direct links by air and by sea with

China are not permitted, although the 'mini three links' allows direct trade and transport services between the Taiwan-held Kinmen and Matsu islands and two ports in China's Fujian Province.

Weng said that some of the smaller live turtles being smuggled had already been crushed to death in the cramped conditions within the hold. He said that, four years ago, his patrol had also uncovered an operation to smuggle 210 kilos of turtle in six boxes from Kinmen to China. Since then, no similar smuggling activity had been detected. Therefore, his investigation would also focus on why turtles and eggs had once again become a target for smuggling.

The turtle eggs were taken to the Kinmen Branch of the Bureau of Animal and Plant Health Inspection and Quarantine (BAPHIQ), where they were destroyed. Meanwhile, the two Xiamen fishermen taken into custody will be prosecuted by the Kinmen District Prosecutors' Office under the National Security Act and other relevant statutes. Furthermore, if the turtle suspected of being a Yellow pond turtle is indeed found to be a protected species, the two suspects will also be charged under the Wildlife Conservation Act.



INTERNATIONAL CONSERVATION NEWSLETTER

COA Draft Regulations for the Encouragement of Land Donation

The Council of Agriculture (COA), Executive Yuan, recently announced the drafting of its Regulations for Awards for the Encouragement of Natural Land Preservation in which it clearly stipulates the COA's duty to provide recognition and financial reward to members of the public who donate natural land to the government for preservation or who have shown exceptional achievement in the area of natural land preservation.

The Cultural Heritage Preservation Act states that 'natural landscape' includes all areas of natural land, landscape, plant cover and geology with conservation or nature value. In order to protect natural landscape, the cabinet-level COA has formulated its draft Regulations for Awards for the Encouragement of Natural Land Preservation so that people who have made a contribution to the protection of natural landscape can be rewarded.

The draft also stipulates that the COA must reward the owners of privately-owned natural landscape who manage their land well and maintain it in excellent condition; who protect or conserve natural landscape in an appropriate manner; who maintain or increase the value of natural landscape; or who have made achievements in the protection of natural

landscape.

Furthermore, the COA must also reward and recognize members of the public who advocate natural landscape preservation or conservation through written articles, books, films, television documentaries, and other means; who organize activities to spread the concept of natural landscape preservation; or who otherwise engage in activities, performances and other creative actions that benefit the conservation or preservation of natural landscape.

Finally, the draft law also stipulates that the COA must provide financial support in the form of grants to cover the costs of natural landscape management and protection.



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