Managing Our Nation's Fisheries 3
Advancing Sustainability

The Caribbean Fishery Management Council

Located in San Juan, Puerto Rico

Jurisdiction: US Caribbean EEZ

CFMC Manages 300+ species under four fisheries management plans.

CFMC has seven voting council members and 3 advisory bodies.

Managing for sustainable and viable fisheries

The Caribbean Fishery Management Council (CFMC) is charged with the managing and conserving fishery resources in the US portion of the Caribbean, since 1976. The Caribbean Council is unique in being the only regional council that does not include one of the any of the 50 states in the Union in its management area. The CFMC jurisdiction area extends from nine nautical miles off the state waters of Puerto Rico, and three nautical miles off the territorial waters off the U.S. Virgin Islands (St. Thomas/St. John, and St. Croix).

Fisheries in the US Caribbean region include commercial and recreational fisheries targeting spiny lobsters, queen conch and other mollusks, and numerous species of fish associated with coral reefs. Commercial fisheries target these species using hooks, nets, traps, and diving gear. Recreational fisheries also target these same species using rod and reel and SCUBA dive gear. Over 230,000 recreational fishermen make more than 1.4 million fishing trips in the area each year. Some anglers fish from shore, while others fish from boats, of which there's a large number (over 60,000 recreational boats) in Puerto Rico and in the U.S. Virgin Islands. To date, the CFMC has developed fishery management plans for the spiny lobster, reef fish, corals and queen conch.

The CFMC adopted a fishery management plan for the spiny lobster in 1981. The plan controls the harvest level of spiny lobster to stop overfishing, ensure economic stability, improve data and understanding of the resource through biological and socio economic research, and reduce gear losses, destruction of habitat, death, and injuries to non-harvested immature and adult lobsters. Management measures include a minimum size limit of 3.5 inches or greater carapace shell length, gear restrictions, and a prohibition on retaining egg-bearing female lobsters. Despite these measures, the landings, catch rates, and relative abundance of spiny lobsters have declined since the beginning of the fishery. The CFMC is working to improve enforcement and data collection for this fishery to enhance the condition of the spiny lobster resources in the region, and has established ACLs for the spiny lobster in the US Caribbean, as mandated by the Magnuson-Stevens Act.

The shallow-water reef fish management plan was implemented in 1985, and it includes over 140 species of commonly landed reef fishes. Of this group, the groupers and snapper fisheries are the most important fisheries in the region. The CFMC has used seasonal area closures to protect these species when and where they are most vulnerable during their spawning aggregations. The complexity of the reef fish fisheries, together with the high diversity of fish species caught on every trip, presents a difficult problem for scientists and managers. The Council adopted annual catch limits, as required by the Magnuson-Stevens Act, for these species given limited catch, bycatch and abundance information.

The CFMC's queen conch management plan include management measures to protect egg-laying conch in both, State and Federal waters, as well as minimum size limits on conch that can be harvested. Queen Conch is commercially and recreationally harvested by divers for its meat and attractive shell. Landings in Puerto Rico and in the US Virgin Islands have fluctuated over the years, with increased catches in the 1990s. The CFMC is working to stop over-harvesting of queen conch and rebuild the species throughout its range.

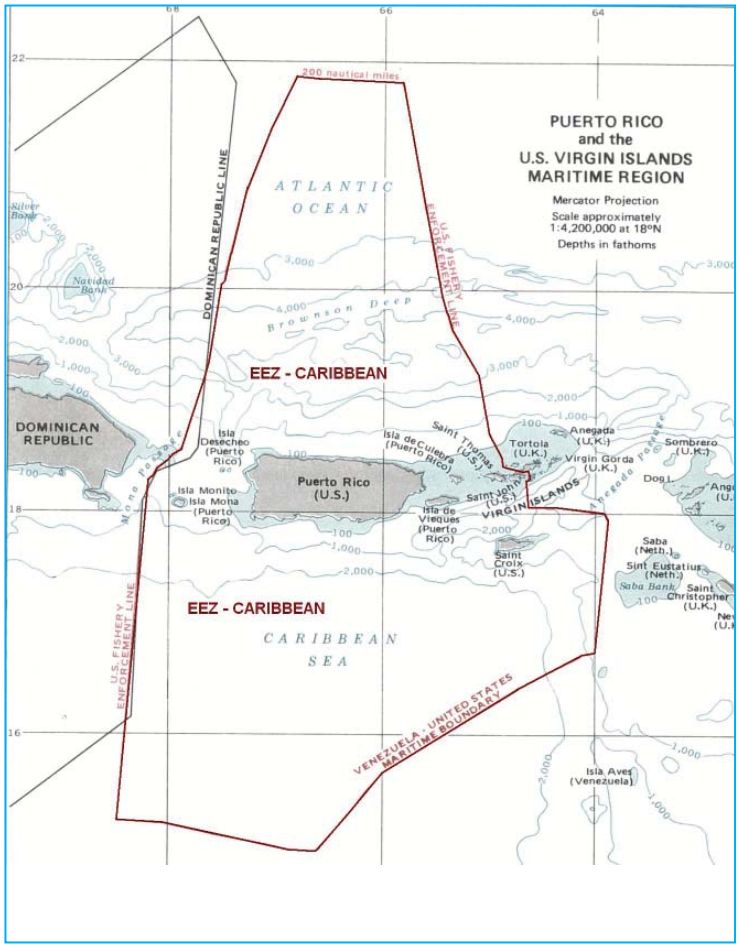
Coordinating international management initiatives

Due to the complexities of the US Caribbean fisheries, and the need to include the ecosystem as a whole in the decision management process, the CFMC approved to work in the development of geographical based FMPs. Thus, there will be separate FMPs for St. Thomas/St. John, St. Croix, and Puerto Rico. It is expected that this will enhance the way in which these areas are being managed, resulting in a better overall benefit to the nation, especially the US Caribbean.

Many species and stocks managed by the CFMC are distributed throughout the Caribbean. Fish move freely between the US Caribbean and International waters, potentially creating conservation problems for those stocks (such as the queen conch) that depend on foreign waters for a particular life stage.

This presents a serious challenge to the effective management of these resources in the region.

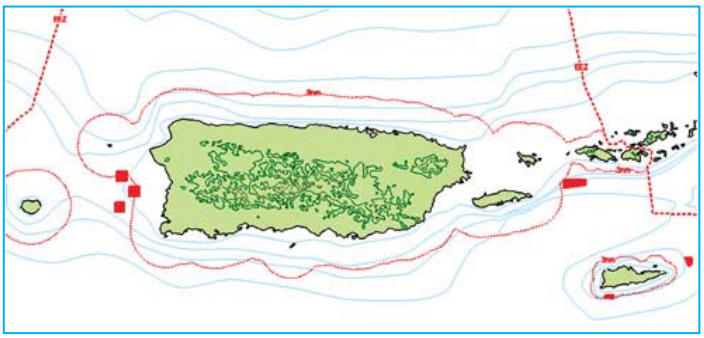
The CFMC has taken the opportunity and initiative to work closely with other countries in efforts to manage the fishery resources on a sustainable basis. The CFMC has spear-headed several international programs, including the International Initiative for Queen Conch and the Nassau Grouper Spawning Aggregation Initiative, whereby more than twenty Caribbean nations work together to conserve pan-Caribbean fish resources.



Through the Queen Conch initiative, the CFMC has helped Caribbean countries develop better management strategies for the conservation of queen conch resources. The queen conch fishery is experiencing overfishing in many areas, and more restrictive measures, such as federal closures to the harvesting of queen conch and/or closed seasons have been imposed by the United States and more than 20 participant countries as well to manage the fishery on a sustainable basis.

Presently, in 2012, a working group under the Western Central Atlantic Fishery Commission of the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (WECAFC) agreed to present a resolution at the CITES meeting in Bangkok, March 2013. This resolution was approved and calls for regional cooperation to establish effective management plans for the queen conch throughout the Caribbean. The CFMC will cooperate with participant countries in the implementation of these directives.

The spiny lobster fishery is another pan-Caribbean resource for which the CFMC coordinates with other fishery management agencies and Caribbean countries to stop the downward trend of lobsters observed in some areas. In 2013, the CFMC will cooperate with the WECAFC to work towards the common management regime for the spiny lobster.



Marine reserves established by the CFMC to protect reefs and associates species