



Black, red and pink corals have been prized as jewelry for 5,000 years. Corals are actually living organisms which are being taken from the sea to satisfy the vanity of a few but wealthy individuals. This is a billion dollar industry.



The exploitation of corals has depleted stocks all over the world. This is not only destroying the seafloor, but has a much wider impact. Corals are more valuable if they stay in the oceans rather than around someone's neck. Coral reefs support more than 25 percent of all known marine fish species. As one of the most complex ecosystems on the planet, coral reefs are home to more than 4,000 different species of fish, and almost 5,000 species of corals, in addition to thousands of other plants and animals. Scientists estimate that coral reefs provide an economic benefit of US\$ 375 billion each year to millions of people around the world. Besides from indirectly feeding people, corals also offer cures for illnesses. Add to that that coral reefs protect our coastlines.

Wealth creates demand

The United States is the largest importer of coral reef species for food, jewelry and aquariums.

The US accounts for approximately 60 percent of the world demand for live reef ornamental products, about 70-90 percent of the live coral, and 95 percent of the live rock (rock with coralline algae growing on it). Seaweb estimates the trade to be increasing between 10 percent and 20 percent per year. It's not only the US that buy coral products. In Europe, this kind of artefacts are gaining popularity, as the populations gets wealthier. Not long ago, British media reported that hundreds of rare corals protected by international conservation laws had been intercepted at airports en route to aquarium shops in Britain. Raw coral commands an auction price ranging from US \$150 to \$900 per kilogram. Necklaces made of the red and pink corals, collectively known as Corallium, can cost up to US\$ 20,000.

A quick search on "red corals" on Google revealed a thriving industry for

coral jewelry. And their sales pitches are second to none. At one website you could read this: "Neptune's Gift. The coral is a mysterious gem with magical powers attributed to it. The Indians believe wearing a Coral will ward off the negative effects . . . the red firestone will help protect them from evil. Even Greeks and the



Text by Arnold Weisz

Corals for sale





Ban on trade hampered

After 5,000 years of trade in red and pink corals prized as jewelry, an attempt to restrict the trade to try to help the species recover after drastic over-exploitation was launched by USA.

Romans have used this stone to adorn rings, caskets, tiaras, etc. Since the sixth century, corals have fascinated humankind with their passionate red color."

Precious corals have been used for the fabrication of items of jewellery and decoration since antiquity. Along with amber, precious coral may have also been used as currency for trade by Paleolithic man.

On June 15, 2007, at a United Nations wildlife conference, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), they actually agreed on trade restrictions. "Corallium, the most valuable of the precious corals, has been fished for over 5,000 years," the US proposal said, adding that millions of items and thousands of kilos a year were traded internationally. The proposal initial-

ly passed on Wednesday, with 62 countries voting in support of the listing. Later the same day whole trade agreement went down the drains. Delegates voted by secret ballot to overturn their initial decision to list these overfished species under the CITES, following a massive lobbying effort by the coral industry and some exporting countries. Environmental organizations were very disappointed over this sudden turn in events.

- There are no international trade controls in place, nor any consistent management plan, TRAFFIC and WWF say.

Opponents to the red coral proposal, amongst others are Japan, a major red coral trading nation, and the industry group Assocoral.



- We started 800 years ago and we want to continue. We are not an industry; this is our tradition, our culture. Coral is our life, said Ciro Conditto of Assocoral, a lobbying group representing the craftsmen in the Mediterranean town Torre del Greco.

Coral in the red

The red coral trade is the most valuable and largest in volume with an estimated 30-50 metric tons per year. Seven red coral species are traded worldwide as jewelry and other decorative products. Many other species of coral are

already protected by CITES. Since deepwater reefs are not visible to the general public, dissemination of information through the media and the education system is vital in order to create empathy for their protection. This will not be an easy task, as coral fisheries

remain extremely important in the Mediterranean Sea, with annual harvests in the last years ranging between 22 and 28 tonnes according to official data from the FAO. Captured both dragging the bottom with a wooden cross provided with rope mops and by diving. The total catch reported for this species to FAO for 1999 was 26,5 t. The countries with the largest catches were Spain 6,9 t and Italy 3,9 t.

For more info on the topic:
www.tooprecioustowear.org
www.seaweb.org
www.traffic.org
www.assocoral.it ■