

Despite export bans global seahorse trade continues

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Dried pipefish and seahorses on sale in Hong Kong. Credit: ©Amanda Vincent, Project Seahorse

Many countries are engaged in a vast illegal and unrecorded international trade in seahorses, one that circumvents global regulations, according to new UBC study that has implications for many other animal species.

The United Nations Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) restricts exports of seahorses to those that have been sourced sustainably and legally. Seahorses were the first marine fishes subject to such regulation, largely because of work by the [Project Seahorse](#) team at UBC's Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries.

The goal of this CITES regulation was sustainable use but most countries that exported large numbers of seahorses have subsequently either chosen to ban exports or had bans imposed on them by CITES. Approximately 98 per cent of seahorses previously found in [global trade](#) came from countries that have now imposed bans, so both exports and imports should more or less have ended.

However, the new research from UBC indicates that many nations with bans apparently continued to export dried seahorses, thus neither meeting their obligations under CITES nor enforcing the [trade](#) bans.

"The 183 Parties to CITES are required to limit export of species that have been placed on Appendix II, including seahorses, to levels that are safe for wild populations. Many are struggling to meet this obligation," explains Dr. Amanda Vincent, senior author on the paper, professor in UBC's Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries, and co-founder and Director of Project Seahorse.

"We found that 95 per cent of dried seahorses in Hong Kong's large market were reported as being imported from source countries that had export bans being in place, including Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, India, Malaysia, and Viet Nam," noted Dr. Ting-Chun Kuo,

co-author and, during the study, a Ph.D. candidate in Project Seahorse.

"This is a remarkable discovery given the high proportion of global [seahorse](#) trade that goes through Hong Kong," commented Dr. Sarah Foster, lead author and Research Associate with Project Seahorse. "Such illegal shipments lacked the required CITES records and permits. This means that many seahorse populations continue to be under heavy pressure without CITES oversight of sources and sustainability of trade."

Dr. Vincent, who also Chairs the [global expert group on seahorses](#), points to problematic fishing methods as a driver of the trade. "The great majority of seahorses are obtained as bycatch in bottom trawls and other non-selective fishing methods. Such indiscriminate fishing obtains at least 37 million seahorses each year, a vast number that can easily enter trade. It is vital that such fisheries be constrained, even as trade is regulated."

"It is going to take all actors and agencies to curb the substantial illegal trade in seahorses and other marine wildlife," noted Dr. Foster, also Global Trade Officer for the expert group on seahorses. "CITES needs to work more closely with the nations involved to ensure strict enforcement so that traders reject seahorses from source countries with trade bans, and authorities impose penalties such as confiscation and stiff fines."

That said, it would be far better for CITES members to manage their trade sustainably than to declare bans that are not implemented. At present, most seahorse trade occurs in a black market, neither tracked nor regulated.

"The current high level of illegal activity may have significant consequences for conservation of wild populations. Getting this right is vital for seahorses and for the other marine fishes subject to CITES

regulation, such as sharks, rays, Napoleon wrasse and European eels," concluded Dr. Vincent.

More information: Sarah J. Foster et al, Global seahorse trade defies export bans under CITES action and national legislation, *Marine Policy* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.marpol.2019.01.014](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2019.01.014)

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