

# How a mollusk found in the Florida Keys can put you in jail

August 2 2022, by Alexander Lugo

---



Credit: Daniel Neal from Sacramento, CA, US, CC BY 2.0

Florida's marine life attracts people from all over the world—but what happens if someone gets too comfortable with the state's natural wonders?

Florida has strictly enforced laws in place to protect wildlife. Last week, for instance, a tourist visiting from Houston was accused of taking eight [queen conch](#) from their habitats in the Florida Keys. He was arrested and taken to jail.

Yet again, restaurants serve conch on the menu.

So what is allowed and what isn't? What is a queen conch? And what's the penalty for taking one?

Here are some answers:

## **What to know about queen conch**

Queen conch are mollusks that live in spiral sandy-colored shells with a bright pink or orange interior. They can be found throughout the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico.

The conch are central to Bahamian culture, serving as a part of the island's diet and one of its major exports. Because of their popularity, conch have been overfished and are facing threats to their population levels.

In the Florida Keys, the queen conch is also central to the culture. People born in Key West call themselves "conchs," after the marine creature snorkelers often encounter off the coast.

## **Laws protecting queen conch**

In the 1970s, Florida banned the harvest of the beloved creature due to overfishing. To this day, it's a [crime](#) to harvest, kill or harm a live queen conch in Florida. It's also illegal to possess or transport a live queen conch, even if it was harvested outside the state.

The crime is considered a second-degree misdemeanor, meaning someone can be punished with up to 60 days in jail, a \$500 fine and six months of probation.

People can collect conch shells as long as there is no living conch in the shell.

However, living queen conch and Bahama starfish are illegal to take. Clams, oysters and mussels have some harvesting restrictions in place, but can be scooped up at spots approved by the Florida Department of Agriculture.

In recent years, there's been a few cases of people, typically from out of town, arrested after being spotted by police with queen conch.

## **Is it legal to serve and eat queen conch?**

So how are Florida restaurants able to serve the preserved animal as food if it's illegal to kill?

Florida [restaurants](#) buy imported queen conch meat, which is completely legal to do.

The U.S. is a major importer of the meat because of how protected it is in U.S. waters. In 2017, the U.S. brought in over 230,000 pounds of queen [conch](#) meat in imports. That's roughly the same weight as 15 elephants combined.

©2022 Miami Herald.

Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: How a mollusk found in the Florida Keys can put you in jail (2022, August 2) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-08-mollusk-florida-keys.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.