

Project Conch-Fu

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Mary Lou Pressick has a

scientific study going that could caught in Virgin Island waters -
put lots more fresh conch - on our dinner plates.

She affectionately refers to her project at Conch-Fu because it concentrates on the little-known West Indian Fighting Conch.

"We're studying all the conch species - looking at the animal and its habits, where it lives and what it eats and how many live together," Dr. Pressick explained.

"But we're doing a specialized population study on the West Indian Fighting Conch because it's been much less studied than the larger Queen Conch."

Dr. Pressick said most Virgin Islanders have traditionally mistaken the fully grown Fighting Conch for a young Queen Conch.

"They look very much alike," said Dr. Pressick, 35, an assistant professor of zoology at the University of California at Berkeley, as she held up a Fighting Conch in the laboratory at Island Resources Foundation.

"The Fighting Conch is bright orange or red on the inside and pinky-white on the outside," she explained.

"Usually they come way out of their shells and whip around. They do it to flip over or leap to another place and possibly as a defense mechanism against predators in the water - lobsters, rays, some sharks, octopus. But they've never been observed to fight each other."

Dr. Pressick, who is on sabbatical from Berkeley, got involved with the Fighting Conch when she came to St. Thomas over a month ago to work on a coral reef ecology project. She has done research in the islands "on and off for years."

Richard Dewey, a biology teacher at Charlotte Amalie High School, told her about a bed of Fighting Conch he had been observing. They agreed to work together on a study.

"We know of three beds around St. Thomas now and there are probably more," said Dr. Pressick, who specializes in economically important organisms.

"These conchs live in groups of 200 to 300 fully grown animals in clean sand instead of grass or coral. Usually the beds are about 60-by-100 feet in about 35 feet of water. They're about a quarter-mile from shore."

Part of the current study involves measuring the Fighting Conch, noting their locations and tagging them. At a later time the project team will return to determine if the conchs have grown and moved.

Another part of the project includes a study of all the relationships between the Fighting Conch in their sandy bed and the Queen Conch in their grassy bed.

How will this put conch on our tables?

"We hope in the long run to do two things," Dr. Pressick explained. "We hope to locate new beds of conch - both Queen Conch, which are more important economically because they're larger, and Fighting Conch, which are edible too - in deeper waters where the fishermen haven't looked before. And we would like to think about raising conch."

Henry Wheatley, a trustee of Island Resources Foundation, feels the project could have great commercial significance for the Virgin Islands.

"The bulk of the conch sold fresh here is brought in from the British Virgin Islands or the Bahamas, which means most of the money spent for a favorite food of the Virgin Islands goes out of the islands," Wheatley said.

"And the amount of conch being sold is just a fraction of the potential market because not that much fresh conch is available and people are turned off by the frozen conch in the supermarkets.

"We would like to find support for isolating and fencing off a grassy area where Queen Conch will grow, to raise them away from predators probably we could grow them from eggs."

"But all that requires study -- and money."

Wheatley is optimistic that what may work for the conch could work for the lobster too.

Noting Dr. Pressick has a summer project planned at Woods Hole, Mass., to study the deep water population of lobsters, he said, "There could be deep water lobsters here too. We just haven't done any looking and lobsters could be grown under ideal conditions too."

Wheatley expressed disappointment that not enough is being done in the Virgin Islands to take advantage of the wealth in our waters.

"These are things that have brought money to other places when they have put in the money to find out about them," he noted.