



News Release

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**SHEDD AQUARIUM BRINGS SUSTAINABLE LEARNING
TO INTERNATIONAL WATERS TO SAVE ENDANGERED GROUPE**

This Holiday Season, Shedd's Conservation Experts Give the Gift of Sustainable Knowledge to the Bahamian Community

CHICAGO – A holiday in the Bahamas seems like a relaxing way to escape winter temperatures. However, for a team of scientists from Shedd Aquarium, a trip to the Bahamas this month was a conservation mission to share critical gift of knowledge about the rapidly declining Nassau grouper (*Epinephelus striatus*) populations with local officials.

Shedd's director of conservation and research Chuck Knapp, along with representatives from fellow conservation partners, spent nearly a week aboard the aquarium's research vessel *Coral Reef II*, studying and collecting information about the over-exploited grouper. Once known as one of the most important fishery species in the greater Caribbean area, the Nassau grouper is nearly extinct, prompting the conservation watchdog group, the International Union of Conservation for Nature (IUCN), to list the grouper as endangered.

Well-known for their unique reproductive behaviors of travelling from hundreds of miles around the time of the full moons of December and January to spawn for only a few days, the grouper are extremely vulnerable to illegal fishing and over-exploitation. The Nassau grouper is a staple of the daily diets for Bahamian people, creating a supply market for the threatened fish. Recognizing the imminent need to stem the declining grouper population numbers, local Nassau officials have implemented management strategies to sustain and protect the grouper.

As part of the effort, Knapp collaborated with fellow conservationists to launch a monitoring program to assess the status of grouper stocks in 2010. A year later, the team returned to conduct expanded monitoring, evaluate the efficacy of current management efforts, and analyze how current management may be adapted to better meet conservation objectives for this fragile species.

With the help of the grouper's predictable spawning cycle, the conservation team braved the rocky waters of the Caribbean to participate in several "live-boat" dives on the schooling grouper, which requires a synchronized entry into the water for the dive team carefully timed with the boat captain.

Results collected by the team determined that the numbers were much lower than in the past. Historic accounts of aggregations, spawning schools of grouper, were upwards of 10,000 fish; however, the team determined as few as 250 in one aggregation and 500 grouper in a second site. Some of the spawning sites have become entirely inactive while others exhibit roughly one percent of previous site populations. In addition, the team documented approximately 20 illegal fish traps during just a few dives.

The observations from Knapp and the team highlight the continuing, growing issue of illegal fishing and highlight the importance of monitoring and adaptive management to protect the population. All of the results were shared with the Bahamas National Trust and Bahamas Department of Marine Resources, as officials continue to lay out adaptive management systems that include seasonal grouper fishing bans.

“Shedd Aquarium has a long history of marine conservation in the Bahamas, including our iguana research program, but the research on the Nassau grouper population is an important issue, since populations appear to be in decline,” said Knapp. “The team was excited at the chance to see spawning among the grouper, but we were disappointed to see how few spawning grouper remain. It’s a reality check that reminds us of the need and significance of our ongoing conservation collaborations with the Bahamian people.”

This mission represents Shedd Aquarium’s continuing efforts to be a leader in regional and global conservation communities. Other ongoing conservation initiatives at the aquarium include [Shedd's Great Lakes Conservation Initiative](#) and [Right Bite](#), a sustainable seafood consumer education program.

Representatives from the Perry Institute for Marine Science, American Museum of Natural History and New England Aquarium also participated in this grouper conservation trip.

For more information about Shedd Aquarium, please call 312-939-2438 or visit www.sheddaquarium.org.

EDITOR’S NOTE: High resolution images and video are available at:
<https://backup.filesanywhere.com/fs/v.aspx?v=8b72698f5a6576aa71a1>, password: grouper.

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*Shedd Aquarium is supported by the people of Chicago and the State of Illinois.
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