Helpline for giant clams

SIR—Hundreds, possibly thousands, of giant clams (Tridacna sp.) are being cultured commercially in the Caribbean, possibly without any screening for diseases. To our knowledge, more than 600 specimens are being cultured in Bonaire, others in Guadeloupe and in south Florida, and there are unconfirmed reports of other projects in the Caribbean and of planned exhibitions in north Florida and Arizona. The Florida and Bonaire clams are from Palau, Micronesia. We do not know if any of these animals have been tested for pathogens.

We would like to get in touch with all those rearing giant clams in the Atlantic so that we can arrange proper disease screening. There is an urgent need to avoid introducing pathogens which may harm the conduct and reputation of aquaculture or damage Caribbean fisheries. In advocating testing, we do not condone the introduction of Tridacna sp. outside their previous natural ranges, but take a practical approach in an attempt to minimize possible damage.

Several projects in the Pacific are attempting to rear Tridacna sp. for their economically valuable adductor muscle, mantle tissue and shells. However desirable giant clams may be, their diseases, once introduced, may not be easy to eliminate: pathogens accompanying introduced organisms represent an uncontrollable experiment. The most serious pathogen known to occur in Tridacna sp. is a Perkinsus species, apicomplexan, which has caused mass mortalities, and which, alarmingly, seems to possess little host specificity. This genus causes death and disease in bivalves world-wide. Guidelines to prevent the transfer of various microbial associates have been accepted by some of those who distribute and culture these clams in the Pacific (C. E. Birkeland and L. G. Eldredge, personal communication).

Our Caribbean Aquatic Animal Health Project (telephone number 809 899 2048) does not have the authority to prohibit introduction or to certify disease-free stocks of Tridacna sp., but we do seek to establish cooperation between those who are holding these animals in the Atlantic and those working on their biology and diseases. We would be grateful for any information that would help us to locate the Atlantic projects, to arrange for disease screening if necessary, and to help control any disease problems which may arise.

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