



CIBJO  
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SPECIAL REPORT  
CORAL COMMISSION

**Industry and consumer education required to differentiate precious corals from ‘common’ and threatened reef varieties**

By Vincenzo Liverino, President  
CIBJO Coral Commission

**I**n our last Special Report released in 2021 for the Virtual CIBJO Congress, the very first topic to be discussed was a clarification of coral terminology as used in the jewellery industry. Appropriate nomenclature for this

biogenic gem material has been one of the main objectives for the Coral Commission, since its creation within CIBJO’s Sector A in 2014.

The initiative was then steered to fruition by Sector A’s long-time President, Roland Naftule, who we sadly lost earlier this year. A great gentleman with a unique vision of the industry, he had a leadership style that proved



*Enzo Liverino, President of the CIBJO Coral Commission, at the Monte Carlo Scientific Centre in Monaco.*

to be pivotal during the establishment of this commission.

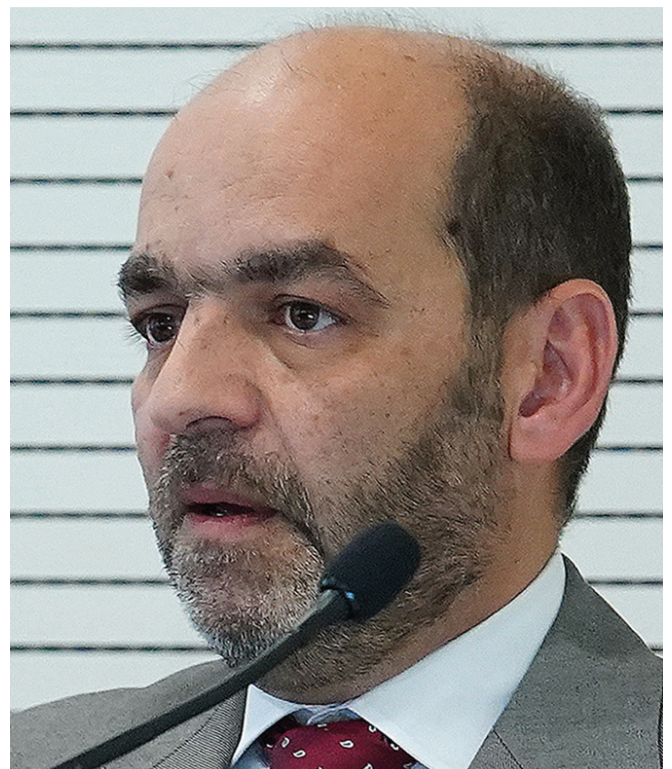
No words can be found to sufficiently express the level of appreciation we have from within the commission for this industry giant. He leaves a great legacy as a guiding light.



*Kenneth Scarratt, Vice President of the CIBJO Coral Commission.*

**Again, it's about the correct definition**

Continued contacts with the stakeholders along the supply chain, especially at the retail level, and the feedback from end-consumers via the social media, have demonstrated that there is still a long way to go in terms



*Galopim de Carvalho, Vice President of the CIBJO Gemmological Commission.*

of clarifying the correct coral terminology in our industry. The Coral Commission Special Report, as a privileged communication tool of our organisation, is an appropriate forum in which to explain our position.

As explained in the CIBJO Blue Book, those precious corals are the ones that are used for jewellery and decoration – and here we specifically refer to those red, pink and white varieties of the gem material with porcelain-like lustre after polishing – which are limited to a small number of coral species. They all belong to the Corallidae family, and consist of the three groups: *Corallium*, *Pleurocorallium* and *Hemicorallium* (Coral Book, clause 3.1.1.1.).

This definition for precious materials rules out the majority of coral species, including those that can occasionally be seen in decoration, which are defined by CIBJO as “common corals.” Examples of such varieties are sponge coral, bamboo coral, black coral, golden coral and blue coral.

The Blue Book definition also rules out many thousands of other species, including those shallow-water reef corals that have been facing the extreme stress of climate change and ocean acidification.

Communicating these trade definitions is critical, since many industry colleagues and consumers are under the erroneous impression that the corals found in jewellery are sourced in colonies located in shallow waters, like the Great Barrier Reef.

The corals defined by CIBJO as precious live in

totally different ecosystems, and in much deeper and colder waters.

The fact that both professional and lay conservationists have been using the expression “precious coral” as a collective term for all cnidarians that may be used for adornment or decoration adds an element of confusion. For the jewellery industry and jewellery products, CIBJO’s definition should be accepted as the standard for our trade. It published in the Coral Blue Books that can be downloaded at <https://www.cibjo.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Official-Coral-Blue-Book-2020-04-05.pdf>.

### Reasonable and questionable limitations

According to the CIBJO definition, we consider as precious corals a selection of coral varieties that include *Corallium rubrum* from the Mediterranean and adjacent Atlantic Ocean, which is still fished today under strict regulations from the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM) and the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO). These are two bodies are dedicated to the conservation and sustainable use of living marine resources in the region and internationally.

Their limitations to specific fishing methods, such as scuba diving only below 50 metres and



Garnet Coral (*Hemicorallium regale*)

Photo: © Liverino 1894

minimum trunk sizes of 7 millimetres, among other regulations, have contributed to the better management of natural resources. Indeed, because of them, *Corallium rubrum* is not listed in CITES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora.

A few precious corals have been listed in CITES Appendix III, and these include *Pleurocorallium elatius*, *Pleurocorallium konojoi*, *Corallium japonicum* and *Corallium secundum*.

Appendix III of CITES notes one country, which that has asked CITES Parties for assistance in controlling the coral trade. The listing of these species was requested by the Peoples Republic of China in 2008 and, since then, according to the organisation, they “may be imported into or exported (or re-exported) from a State party to the Convention only if the appropriate document has been obtained and presented for clearance at the port of entry or exit.”

This means that the trade in these CITES-listed precious corals can be conducted legally if the proper paperwork exists for the authorities to verify.

Many stakeholders have been awaiting a communication from the China as to whether there are still grounds for the listing, and if the measures taken have had any positive results, after 15 years of monitoring the trade and implementing fishing regulations.

### **The aftermath of a natural disaster**

There is still a ban on all coral traded in Thailand. This was the result of the magnitude 9.0 Great Tohoku earthquake off the coast of northeastern Japan on March 11, 2011, and the devastating tsunami that followed, which considerably damaged the local reef coral ecosystem.

CIBJO has been reaching out to the authorities, requesting that they consider the fact that the species affected by the natural disaster are not those used as gem materials in jewellery manufacturing, which is a very strong industry in Thailand. We have pointed out that precious corals do not live in the same ecosystem as those that were impacted by the tsunami, and, according to CITES, are not considered endangered species.



*Number 85 (with angel wings), an 18-centimetre high coral sculpture by Jan Fabre, donated by the artist and Vincenzo Liverino to the Baroque Church of Santa Maria delle Anime del Purgatorio ad Arco in Naples, Italy.*

*Photo: © Liverino 1894*

A correction of the scope of this collective ban would allow precious corals to be imported again into Thailand for the benefit of its jewellery manufacturing and retail industries, returning the situation to where it was before the tsunami.

### The case of 'non-living' coral

As a non-listed species, *Corallium rubrum* can be traded, and imported and exported without legal restriction. This applies especially to those that have been found as a non-living resource. A example of this are the deposits found off the coast of Sciacca, in Sicily, Italy, where considerable amounts of so called "dead coral" branches were found by chance as sediments in 1875.

Of the thousands of metric tons of Sciacca corals recovered, which were used to adorn jewellery artifacts especially in the fourth quarter of the 19th century, only a limited amount are still available today. These "Sciacca corals" are not only precious corals, as defined by CIBJO, but also a non-fished material, since the cnidarian colonies that lived there died many years earlier – sometimes as far as 10,000 years ago, according to radiocarbon dating.

There are also dead precious corals being recovered elsewhere, namely in Japan, belonging to the CITES-listed species (e.g. *Pleurocorallium elatius*). These are routinely collected and fashioned into jewellery artifacts or carved works of art, and they have sometimes been mixed with coral from the living colonies that are fished in the wild.

According to a recent radiocarbon study at Koshi University, which was cited in our previous special report, a significant portion of the coral fished in Japan since the late 19th Century was already non-living when it was taken from the seabed.

At the time of fishing, it is possible to separate the living colonies from the dead branches, mainly due to the presence of an external tissue from the stony skeleton of the colony. Cleaning and fashioning will remove this living tissue, so that it becomes virtually impossible to distinguish between the living and the non-living coral.

When one raises conservation questions about fishing wild living species, one needs to eliminate the presence of the non-living species, such as the well-documented examples of *Corallium*



*18th Century hairclips  
decorated with Sciacca coral.  
Photo:© Liverino 1894*

rubrum from Sciacca and the Pleurocorallium elatius from Japan.

A proposed clause that introduces the notion of dead coral is the only proposed update to the Coral Blue Book received by the Coral Commission over the past year. Because the status of precious coral species in CITES remained unchanged since the last congress, there will be no amendments to the Coral Blue Book presented at the upcoming CIBJO Congress.

### **An educational field trip**

It was announced earlier that the CIBJO Academy was being established, under the leadership of the renowned gem expert Kenneth Scarratt, who is also Vice President of the Coral Commission.

This is a most promising development, for the new body will become a vehicle for educating all jewellery trade stakeholders about CIBJO standards, including those relating to corals.

Through the CIBJO Academy, the work of the Coral Commission will receive significant exposure. This includes the various documents we have released over the years, including the CIBJO Coral Guide for Customs, the CIBJO Coral

Guide for Educators and, of course, the Coral Blue Book.

Education lies at the heart of what we do. In May of this year we organised a field trip initiated by the Jewellery Valuers Association (JVA), which is a body based based in the United Kingdom that brings together jewellery valuers from many geographies and jurisdictions.

After discussing the work done by the CIBJO Coral Commission, we and JVA realized that its membership would benefit from a more hands-on approach, and the three-day biogenic gem field trip was organised in Torre del Greco in Italy.

There we were able to review CIBJO terminology, using examples of both raw and fashioned materials, visually identifying the main precious coral varieties as defined by CIBJO, as well as studying coral valuing criteria and international trade requirements, especially where CITES is concerned.

Initiatives like this one have been taking place in several countries and are very positive outcomes of the work done by CIBJO. The inauguration of the CIBJO Academy will certainly inspire more stakeholders to educate our industry in matters that are of great relevance.



### **COVER PHOTO MONTAGE CREDIT**

Photo of ocean by Naja Bertolt Jensen on Unsplash.  
Coral sculpture of pigeon, 160 centimetres in height, was created by Jan Fabre, and donated by Vincenzo Liverino to the Pio Monte della Misericordia, a 16th Century church in Naples, Italy. *Photo:*© Liverino 1894

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