

Information Sheet No. 7

The Queen Conch Life Cycle

During the reproductive season, large aggregations of conch will migrate towards shallow water (10m (3.5 ft) or less) and breed in coarse sandy habitats near reefs and seagrass *Thalassia testudinum* beds. The conch have separate sexes and internal fertilization. The female lays a crescent shaped egg mass which contains up to 400,000 eggs. Females can lay an average of 9 egg masses per season or an estimated 3 to 4 million eggs per season. A female conch camouflages the egg mass with sand grains to help ensure its survival through the three to four day incubation period. When the egg mass hatches, the planktotrophic veligers will progress through a three to eight week cycle of stages while drifting in the water column.

Once the veligers are morphologically ready (1-2 mm SL), they will respond to a trophic cue and settle on or near a seagrass bed and undergo metamorphosis into a fully benthic animal. The juvenile conch will remain buried for the majority of their first year of life, possibly as a means to avoid predation. As herbivorous gastropods, the juvenile and adult conch will feed on a variety of algae, detritus, and diatoms that are commonly found on sand, seaweed, and seagrass blades. During the first couple of years, the juvenile conch will begin to add length to their shell. After 2.5 - 3 years of age, the juvenile stops adding shell length and begins to add shell to form the flaring lip. At this time, the conch will become a sexually mature adult, and begin the cycle all over again.

Which is a male and which is a female conch?

