

# Coral imports:

The responsible reefkeeper

*the right and* ✓  
*✗ wrong routes*

Following the recent seizure of the UK's biggest illegal coral haul, Tim Hayes, of Midland Reefs, look at how corals arrive here — both inside and outside of the law.

**T**he timing of this article is particularly apt. This is the International Year of the Reef (see box), more and more people are seeming to attempt to import corals, and newspaper reports have this year described "the largest live coral consignment discovered in Britain"

Those attempting this increase in imports aren't just retailers, which would be understandable, but hobbyists and people out to make a quick buck.

The reef aquarium hobby is not cheap and I doubt it ever will be. There are many valid reasons for the prices of corals in aquatic shops being what they are. Unfortunately many uninformed people don't understand the realities of the trade and think they can either bring prices down or make a bit of money. There's also a minority of reefkeepers with lamentable attitudes who ask shops to get rare corals — regardless of their legality.

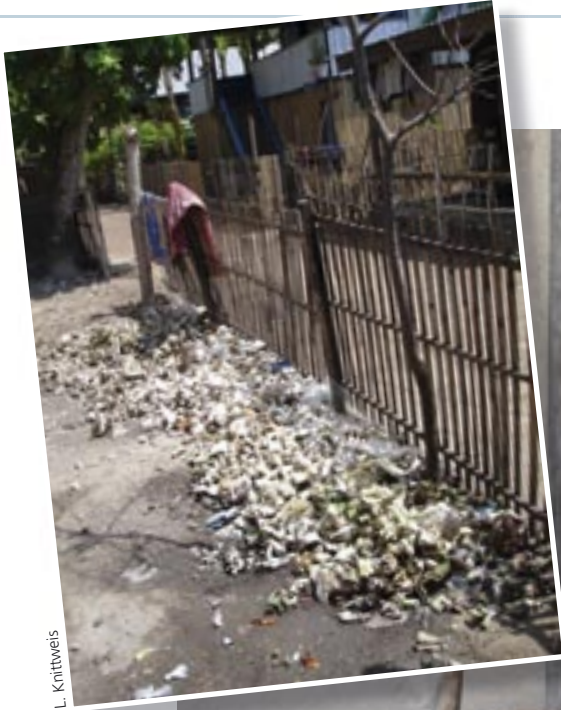
## Self policing

This is all driving the trade in illegal imports, which has the potential to bring both the hobby and trade into disrepute. As ever, I feel it's up to the hobby and industry to take measures to police itself before restrictions are placed on us from outside.

There's a strong case for making possession of a current pet shop licence a legal requirement for those intent on importing livestock, not just corals. This won't be a complete answer to the problem, but may have an



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**OPPOSITE PAGE:**  
**Washing corals prior to display.**

**ABOVE INSET:**  
**Unwanted rejects face a sorry end.**

**ABOVE:**  
**Sorting by size, shape and colour — often in direct sunlight.**

influence on reducing its size.

Some illegal importation isn't consciously so, and many coral imports end up illegal through ignorance of the procedure. Some importations are blatantly illegal, with the banned corals brought into the country deliberately misdescribed as legal species.

The former may be owing to unfamiliarity with the system, resulting in unintentional mistakes with the required paperwork. The latter is an illegal practice that should not be tolerated.

### What determines legal?

As far as the UK is concerned, there are three sets of legislation regulating the trade in corals: CITES, EC 338/97, and COTES.

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) came into force in 1975 and 171 countries signed up.

There are three categories or appendices that traded species can be listed under:

■ **Appendix I, with about 1,000 species.** These are the ones under

most threat and trade in these is effectively banned.

■ **Appendix II, with more than 30,000 species.** These are threatened or might become threatened by international trade and their trade is regulated for sustainability. This includes around 2000 species of hard corals.

■ **Appendix III, with species threatened only in parts of their range.**

Regulated trade in coral species in CITES Appendix II is permitted provided the exporting country is sure the export will not be detrimental to the survival of the species; specimens have been legally obtained and welfare guidelines are observed during handling and shipping.

The EU Wildlife Trade Regulation (EC 338/97) supplements CITES legislation for the 27 countries of the European Union. This enables the European Commission to impose import restrictions on certain species or countries. If an importing country is concerned about the viability of a particular species, it can be passed on to the EU Scientific Review Group to investigate.

If a finding decrees that trade in this species is not detrimental, a Positive Opinion is formed and imports can be resumed. If the initial concern is confirmed, the group forms a Negative Opinion and imports are banned into all 27 member states.

These opinions are reviewed regularly in light of new biological information or trade statistics and bans can be swiftly put into place or lifted in response to new data.

In the UK further powers to enforce controls are contained in The Control of Trade in Endangered Species (Enforcement) Regulations 1997 (COTES). Among other aspects, this gives police certain powers of entry and power to obtain samples for DNA analysis.

### Trouble at source

Most people in the trade, from collection from the reef to sale in the UK, seem to view corals merely as a commodity. They are brought into this country either directly to one of a handful of wholesalers, who unpack and acclimate corals before selling them onto retailers, or



they come through a process known as consolidation. This is where a freight forwarding agent sends coral lists to a number of people, takes individual orders, and then ships everything into the country at the same time.

Wholesalers are more likely to have an intimate knowledge of the supply chain and can be confident that everything has been collected and shipped to a good standard. However, this is not always the case with consolidated shipments. It is important to know as much as possible about the chain of supply to ensure the animals imported into the trade are being handled in an ethical manner.

Corners can be cut and animal welfare neglected, as can be seen in this following case study. The scenario comes courtesy of a coral researcher who's been looking at the coral trade in Indonesia where 90% of wild-collected colonies originate.

The area of Indonesia where these photographs were taken specialises in large polyp species like *Trachyphyllia* and *Catalyphyllia*, although a variety of other species are also pictured. Look carefully and you'll see easily recognisable *Euphyllia* and *Fungia*.

These pictures tell a sorry story. The collector, in the manner typical in Indonesia, will sort them outside where they are often subject to direct sunlight for several hours while waiting for the pickers or dealers to turn up and see what's available. And you worry about having corals out of water for a few minutes!

The dealers sort through, choosing the ones they favour for export. These are then packed in water and boxed to take away. The rejects are simply left to die, either outside the collector's hut or dumped on the beach.

In addition to the appalling handling these corals receive, and the waste at source, there's also the knock-on effect of how well the chosen corals are going to fare long term, given the atrocious treatment they've already received.

Look at the picture of the corals dumped on the beach and notice the discarded plastic bags. This contributes to another serious problem — that of a polluted marine environment, endangering mammals, turtles, and birds. These bags kill much wildlife each year. Animals mistake them for jellyfish, eat them, then die from internal blockage, or get tangled up in them

and die of starvation.

This is a particular problem with turtles for which jellyfish represent a significant part of their diet. Six of the world's seven species of marine turtle are found in Indonesia, including the critically-endangered Hawksbill.

## What can be done?

It seems obvious that, to reduce this waste, either the trade needs to be policed at source or importation should only be undertaken through accredited suppliers. Implementing legislation at source would take time and effort across a number of countries where control of trade in aquarium species may not be a high local priority. The quicker, easier way of improving the trade already exists in the form of MAC.

In 2005 I introduced PFK readers to the Marine Aquarium Council (MAC). It is an international, non-profit organisation that has created a system of standards and certification for ornamental marine life that covers every step of the way between an organism's collection from the reef and being put on sale at your local shop.

Unfortunately, since I first wrote about MAC, there's been no progress in the UK, with the exception of one retailer becoming certified (well done, The AquaWorld Partnership, Warrington!). It may be worth asking your local shop why they don't sign up. I don't think the usual reply of 'oh, there's no call for certified fish' is an acceptable answer for a responsible retailer.

MAC isn't perfect; its greatest defect being that there's no provision for policing participants, leaving its standards open to abuse.

However, there is a potential alternative on the horizon. I've proposed a marine livestock traders association to raise standards of animal welfare in the UK trade, but moves are in their early stages.

Incidentally, MAC is the subject of this year's NAW campaign. Each year the National Aquarium Workshop (an informal association of British public aquariums) chooses a subject about which to raise public awareness. Previous campaigns have included, Shellshock (marine turtles), The Big Fish Campaign (oversized aquarium fishes), and The Marine Reserves Campaign (UK marine reserves).

## ZSL's role

HM Customs and the Zoological



Discarded plastic bags are an environmental hazard.

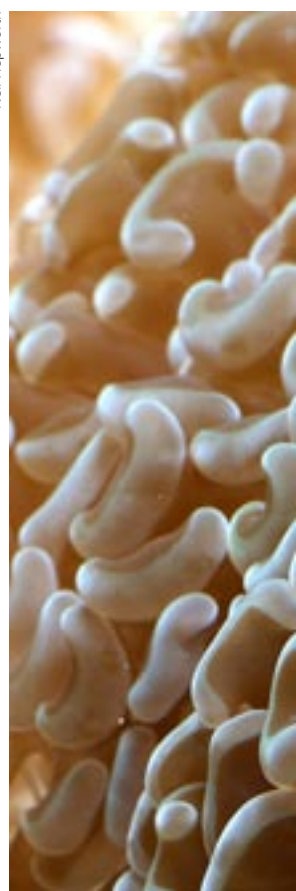
L. Knittweis

## UK confiscations – by numbers

This chart shows the ten genera that comprise two-thirds of the confiscations received by ZSL from 2003 – 2007. This reflects the composition of global imports, with *Acropora* species being the most traded, followed by LPS species.

Genus	Percentage
<i>Acanthastrea</i> spp.	3%
<i>Acropora</i> spp.	15%
<i>Blastomussa</i> spp.	4%
<i>Catalyphyllia</i> spp.	4%
<i>Euphyllia</i> spp.	10%
<i>Favia</i> spp.	3%
<i>Goniopora</i> spp.	9%
<i>Montipora</i> spp.	4%
<i>Porites</i> spp.	3%
<i>Trachyphyllia</i> spp.	12%

Neil Hepworth



## International Year of the Reef 2008

This is a worldwide campaign to raise awareness about the value and importance of coral reefs, threats to their sustainability, and to motivate people to protect them. All individuals, corporations, schools, governments and organisations are encouraged to participate.

The first International Year of the Reef (IYOR) was 1997 and initiated in response to increasing threats and loss of coral reefs and associated ecosystems. It was a global effort to increase awareness and understanding of the reefs, and support conservation, research, and reef management, and attracted over 225 organisations in 50 countries and territories.

There remains an urgent need to highlight awareness and understanding, and further conserve reef and associated ecosystems. IYOR 2008 aims to strengthen awareness about the ecological, economic, social and cultural value of coral reefs and associated ecosystems.

I plan to describe more of IYOR's aims soon, but in the meantime readers can visit <http://www.iyor.org> for more information.

Society of London (ZSL) has worked with the UK customs authorities since 2003, providing support in identifying corals and housing confiscated live animals. Over the last four years it has received around 1,000 individual hard coral specimens, along with many hundred soft corals, fish, and other invertebrates, confiscated by HM Customs at Heathrow.

There are only two border inspection posts in the UK where livestock is permitted to enter — at Heathrow and Manchester. Of these, Heathrow, as the world's busiest international airport, has a large animal reception centre which acts as the live animal border inspection post. It is equipped to process the necessary paperwork and house the many varied species confiscated or under inspection.

### Identification problems

Customs and Excise permanently staff this with a dedicated CITES team. Unfortunately, the difficulties associated with holding marine species confiscated at short notice, sometimes in large numbers, make the job of dealing with illegal shipments very difficult.

The complex problem of accurate coral identification makes it difficult for customs teams to make positive species identification. Indeed, ID can be difficult even for someone experienced at handling corals, something to which I can personally testify after taking part in a taxonomy workshop last year at the first International Symposium of Coral Husbandry in Public Aquaria!

If no one with knowledge of coral taxonomy is available at short notice, CITES teams may have no choice but to release shipments. However, this is an area where ZSL steps in to help.

No two confiscations are identical in composition, but what they do have in common is poor condition of the corals. These shipments have spent a couple of days in transit from their point of origin, Indonesia or Fiji, en route to London where there's a further delay while the Customs' inspection is made and paperwork checked.

Consequently, when ZSL takes charge, the water quality in the bags will have deteriorated and the temperature dropped. Repeated handling will have caused physical damage to the corals and, subsequently, many colonies will succumb to bacterial infection. LPS corals fare particularly poorly as

their thin tissue is readily damaged against their hard skeletons. It's worth noting that these corals can be difficult to ship, even under the best of conditions.

ZSL's other major role is to house confiscated shipments at the London Zoo aquarium. This can be a challenge as it's not easy to have and maintain mature quarantine facilities at a moment's notice.

There are ten available tanks, which, with their varying size, depth and lighting, can just about cope with any confiscated shipment. Unfortunately, quarantine can't always be carried out perfectly, which means there's a potential risk to the existing collection.

Most confiscations arrive with little warning, often at the end of the day, and staff stay late unpacking, sorting, and acclimatising animals frequently in poor condition.

Careful attention has to be given to resolving compatibility issues, while avoiding further injury.

### Commitment

Confiscated corals remain the property of HM Customs. Any that die are cleaned, labelled, and the skeletons retained in case further analysis is needed. Every coral is photographically recorded and, if ZSL wants to pass any specimens on to another public aquarium, it needs permission.

The commitment made by ZSL is a significant one; dealing with confiscations takes up valuable staff time, aquarium space and veterinary resources.

But the importance of the agreement to take any shipment at any time is a valuable commitment that ensures that the customs teams have the support they need to confiscate illegal shipments without further compromising the welfare of the animals.

Thanks to Rachel Jones of ZSL for providing some of the background material for this article. ■

### Our concerns

As responsible reefkeepers we should all be concerned about where our corals come from and how they've been treated on their journey to our aquaria. Please ask your local retailers about where their livestock comes from and make them aware that some aquarists do care about this issue!



*Euphyllia  
ancora*