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Rob Report Reef madness Unregulated aquarium fish trade is plundering Hawaii's reefs

by Rob Parsons write the author

July 24, 2008

It is almost unfathomable that collection of "ornamental" fish from Hawaii reefs for saltwater aquariums takes place without limits—both on the number of collectors and on the numbers of fish they capture. But that is the sobering reality of an industry that continues to upset the fragile balance of coral reef ecosystems by removing as many as a million fish annually, although estimates of the actual take range from 2-10 times the reported number.



The yellow tang is one of many fish coveted by aquarium enthusiasts

A Hawaii fish collection license may be obtained from the Department of Land and Natural Resources' (DLNR) Division of Aquatic Resources (DAR) at a cost of just \$50 for one year. Beyond issuance of that permit, there is no management system in place to ensure that wild populations of fish are not harmed by collection.

There are an estimated one million saltwater aquariums in the United States, according to the video *Impacts Of Aquarium Trade in Hawaii*, also posted on YouTube. Produced by the Pacific Fisheries Coalition in collaboration with the Hawaii Audubon Society, the video states that eighty percent of the fish stocking those aquariums are captured from the wild in Hawaii.

Prices to Hawaii collectors are low, compared to what the fish will fetch in a Mainland pet store. The coveted yellow tang, by far the most exported of Hawaii's "ornamental" species, brings \$40-\$80 in a Mainland pet store, but the Hawaii collector nets only \$3. Thus, collecting large numbers is necessary, especially since a percentage of fish die en route.

Many of the coveted species are herbivores, and serve the important function of grazing algae from Hawaii's coral reefs. Others, such as the fourspot and ornate butterfly fish, are coral feeders and thus may be poorly suited to aquarium conditions. The colorful Hawaii cleaner wrasse is one on the reef's health practitioners, nibbling parasites off of a number of other species. In a captive aquarium setting, without the diversity of the reef



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ecosystem, many of these fish die far short of their life expectancies in the wild, often of starvation.

A study by Hawaii marine biologists noted a sharp population decline of at least four popular species of the aquarium trade: the Moorish idol, Potter's angelfish, longnose butterfly and yellow tang. Without rules or regulations to control what is extracted, the pillaging of the resource will continue—unless our state leaders see the wisdom of implementing a recovery period to offer protection to Hawaii's reefs.

The 2008 Hawaii legislative session saw the introduction of Senate Bill 3225, seeking to establish a series of Fish Replenishment Areas (FRA) on Oahu and Maui, to replicate a model that has been in effect on West Hawaii since 2001. The bill described the competing interests of those collecting ornamental or aquarium fish, and those in the snorkel and dive industry seeking to keep them in place for overall reef health.

State elected officials often kowtow to economic interests above all else, so the annual income to a few hundred collectors—perhaps \$20 million dollars—is noteworthy. But reef-related tourism from the snorkel, scuba and sport fishing industries brings in \$1 billion yearly, according to the Hawaii Tourism Authority. Snorkel and dive boats alone employ more than 2,000 workers statewide.

With testimony running 30-1 supporting the bill, SB 3225 passed the State Senate unanimously, by a vote of 25-0. However, after crossover to the State House Committee on Water, Land, Ocean Resources and Hawaiian Affairs,

Rep. Ken Ito (D-Kaneohe) failed to schedule a hearing for the bill, even after promising he would do so.

The legislature did pass House Concurrent Resolution 347, asking that the DLNR expedite "the adoption of rules to regulate the ornamental reef fish industry in south Maui and Kaneohe Bay," and to provide recommendations prior to convening the 2009 legislative session. Senate Concurrent Resolution 17 SD1 called for similar rules and regulations to be considered for statewide waters.

To that end, DLNR Chairperson Laura Thielen addressed a Maui audience last week when Governor Linda Lingle's Maui Advisory Council met at the Hannibal Tavares Center in Pukalani. Thielen addressed three agenda items: Establishment of a "no-take" zone for herbivorous fish in areas of West Maui, where algae blooms are prevalent; bag and size limits for various fish species; and aquarium collecting.

Thielen related that the West Maui proposal, to prohibit taking certain herbivore species from Hanako`o Beach to South Honokawai, had already been discussed in 15 community meetings. She said she pressed the Attorney General's office to expedite their review of draft rules, and that now the proposal could go out to formal public rule-making meetings.

The tedious process is reminiscent of the decade of discussion since the original formation of the Hawaii Gillnet Task Force in

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September 1998, to the eventual adoption of a partial ban on monofilament lay gill nets in July, 2007.

Thielen said that DLNR will begin a series of meetings regarding the aquarium collecting industry, and that discussions would take place about the West Hawaii model and data of the Fish Replenishment Areas, where no collecting is permitted. "This doesn't have to be a one size fits all," said Thielen, noting that rules could be determined for each island.

She went on to say that she believed kiosks placed in state harbors would facilitate reporting of fish catches, and that it would help reduce the time-consuming paper reporting. "We have the ability to regulate the harvesting of aquarium fish," she stated.

Not everyone agrees. The majority of testifiers called for a 10-year recovery period, to allow protection of the resource while studying whether a sustainable extraction of "ornamental" fishes is possible. One speaker noted that during months of volunteer work at the `Ahihi-Kina`u Natural Area Reserve in South Maui, visitors to the area often were caught with fishing equipment, spears or nets. "Enforcement is almost impossible," he said.

Governor Lingle and the legislature have increased the number of officers statewide in the Division of Conservation and Recreation Enforcement. Yet, with no rules to enforce other than the West Hawaii FRA off-limits sites, they have no legal means to safeguard the resource they are hired to protect.

Maui resident and business owner Robert Wintner has devoted hundreds of hours to ocean and reef conservation measures, and established the non-profit Snorkel Bob Foundation in 2001. He has spent countless hours at the State Capitol, talking to elected officials to educate them about the harm being done to Hawaii's reefs. Undaunted by SB 3225 being blocked, he is now leading the charge to promote resource protection through the proposed 10-year recovery period, with no aquarium fish collecting and no wild "ornamental" reef fish sold.

Wintner distributed information recalling that live coral and "live rock" porous substrate beneath it was once harvested to supply the aquarium industry. The State Legislature passed laws to prohibit this practice, in the 1970s and again during the 1990s.

A reef is defined as a balanced system, in which the coral/live rock habitat is dependent on the 'ornamental' fish living there, and vice versa," states information on the savehawaiianreefs.org website. "We have laws to keep our coral and live rock in place," it continues, "but no protection for the other half of the system."

The Humane Society of the United States and the Humane Society International transmitted joint testimony to the Senate Ways and Means Committee in February, 2008. They stated their opposition to keeping wild animals of any sort as pets and said that the trade in live fish, "threatens the survival of wild populations and causes unacceptable treatment of the animals."

"The wild-caught fish trade is cruel, wasteful and destructive to

Hawaii's biological diversity," they wrote. "In this, the International Year of the Coral Reef...it is fitting that Hawaii is re-examining its control over this destructive trade."

With a double-digit dip in tourist numbers over the past couple months and a sagging real estate market, Hawaii's economy is showing signs of fatigue. It is not out of the question that more people may take advantage of a mere fifty dollar licensing fee to make a cash grab by collecting reef fish, creating even more stress on the dwindling populations and the reefs as a whole.

Let's hope that our collective voices may help to influence our elected leaders to act swiftly to protect our ocean resources before time runs out. *MTW*

For more information see:

<http://savehawaiianreefs.org/index.html>

[target="_new">http://www.snorkelbob.com/sb_foundation.htm](http://www.snorkelbob.com/sb_foundation.htm)

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