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HAWAII'S **Complete** SOURCE

Posted on: Friday, June 4, 2010

Maui bills target reef fish captures

By Chris Hamilton
 Maui News

WAILUKU, Maui — Maui County's coral reefs and colorful fish are under assault by permitted collectors and outside poachers who capture the fish to sell to aquarium owners across the globe, according to two Maui County Council members who presented bills Wednesday to regulate the industry here.

Council members Wayne Nishiki and Mike Molina wrote companion bills aimed at bolstering a reef fish population that experts contend has shrunk by nearly 60 percent in the past 20 years.

The measures take different tacks: Molina's requires more humane treatment of aquarium fish; Nishiki's establishes an application and permit system to regulate the aquarium fish trade.

Current state law, which is enforced by the state Department of Land and Natural Resources, requires fish collectors to obtain permits that allow the use of fine mesh nets or traps in capturing fish and that "they possess facilities to and can maintain fish and other aquatic life alive and in reasonable health."

Nishiki chairs the council's Public Services Committee, which began reviewing the measures Wednesday. The panel deferred action on the bills for two weeks.

During public testimony, the bills drew both support and fire.

Robert Wintner, owner of the Snorkel Bob's chain of dive shops, was among those in favor of county regulation.

"If we fail now, reef recovery will support a greedy few who sell Maui's soul to Mainland hobbyists for chump change," he said. "An aquarium fish leaves about \$4 in Maui County but retails on the Mainland for \$50 on up."

One of the commonly taken reef fish for aquariums is the yellow tang, which feeds on reef algae, he said.

On the other side of the debate, tropical fish collectors and owners called the bills draconian and unnecessary. They contended that activity in Maui County only accounts for 2 percent of the tropical fish collection industry in Hawai'i.

Others said that collecting reef fish for aquariums disregards Native Hawaiian cultural respect for

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fish and threatens the visitor industry, which draws people to the islands, in part, to see colorful reef fish while snorkeling or diving.

Opponents said the bills would make criminals of people passionate about having and obtaining aquarium fish. However, environmentalists and tourism industry officials joined in supporting the measures.

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