

November 24, 2012

Wildlife Species are a Public Trust, Not Disposable Trinkets

Sea Shepherd's position on the aquarium trade

By Robert Wintner, member of Sea Shepherd's Board of Directors

The aquarium trade serves a dark hobby, confining coral reef wildlife and destroying reefs around the world. Stripping reefs for an amusement industry is theoretically no different than capturing cetaceans for commercial shows. 98% of aquarium fish are wild caught. Many people may not reflect on the colorful fish in glass tanks used as furnishings for offices, bistros, waiting rooms, or homes—and some people may assume those fish are bred in captivity. The fact is that 2% of those fish are captive-bred and 98% are taken from the wild. This devastating practice results in severe mortality rates from the point of capture through handling, shipping, and acclimation. Coral damage is well documented and often witnessed with viewers observing anchors, chains, and nets in the coral and collectors breaking coral in pursuit of a few more bucks.

The aquarium trade is covered in verbiage, but trafficking in reef wildlife for the pet trade is not sustainable or "captive-bred whenever possible." 40 million reef fish and invertebrates supply 1.5 million aquariums around the world, annually. Wildlife species are a public trust, not disposable trinkets. Marine reef systems are intricately balanced, with each species performing a role in reef maintenance and balance. Multiband Butterflyfish do not leave their reef by choice. Once stripped of Multiband Butterflies, the species is lost to that reef indefinitely. The Hawaiian cleaner wrasse is a charismatic, vital species endemic to Hawaii. They set up cleaning stations where many species gather for grooming in a social setting. Hawaiian cleaner wrasses die in thirty days of captivity without 30-40 other fish to clean, yet they ship out daily for retail sale. Many reefs in Hawaii are now vulnerable to parasite loading. Yellow tangs are herbivores, grazing on algae down to dusk to prevent reef suffocation, yet they ship out by the millions to enhance aquarium trade profits. Hawaii's Director of Natural Resources should not be an aquarium collector. Nor should reef species be sacrificed to support any amusement industry, including sales of tanks, stands, lights, tickets, or decorative trinkets. Under pressure worldwide from acidification, climate change, and associated events—like crown of thorns starfish invasions triggered by warmer water—coral reef systems must maintain optimal immune systems with a full balance of species.



Live fish ready to be sold online

Photo: Robert Wintner



Multiband Butterflyfish duet

Photo: Robert Wintner

The staggering death rate of captive reef wildlife occurs mostly in the 30-day span between capture and chemical error in a home aquarium. Many of these species live for decades in the wild, providing reef function and reef balance.

Hawaii is the third largest supplier of reef fish in the U.S. aquarium trade, accounting for empty reefs and vanishing reef species. Florida takes millions of reef individuals annually, even as society scapegoats the invasive lionfish, a voracious predator introduced by the aquarium trade to east coast and Caribbean reefs. Lionfish did not reach the Atlantic on their own.

Aquarium trade trafficking leaves reefs unbalanced, degraded, and depleted. No factor in reef decline can absolve any other factor- acidification, runoff, climate change, or any other negative impact on reef health cannot justify aquarium extraction. The Sea Shepherd Conservation Society seeks

to stop global trafficking in live fish for hobby or display markets.



*This yellow tang died in a hotel "seafood" restaurant from terminal fin rot caused by dirty water
Photo: Robert Wintner*



*650 dead yellow tangs and butterflyfish pulled from a Kona dumpster after a collector dumped them because he couldn't quite get his chemistry right
Photo: Robert Wintner*

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