

The Downside of Trading

STORY BY BEN SARVER

When discussing the aquarium trade in Hawai'i, be aware of the risk of being drawn into a heated argument. Whenever there is an issue involving land and politics, albeit very important topic discussions to have to move forward for the betterment of current challenges, you are almost guaranteed an epic battle of the minds, depending on what side you stand. Aquarium trade is one such topic.

Aquarium trade is the commercial collection and sale of saltwater reef fish for the purpose of beautifying homes and businesses across America, Asia, Europe and other countries. The abundant coral reefs and the incredible biodiversity of this tropical paradise, combined with its unmatched isolation makes for some of the rarest (some only found in Hawai'i) and most beautiful of all saltwater fish; unique gems for any collector and a lucrative business for the sellers.

That same rarity means that Hawai'i faces some unique and difficult challenges as 80-90% of wild caught aquarium fish in the U.S. come from Hawaiian waters. This inherently means that our state must deal with overfishing, illegal catching and trafficking of reef fish, as well as dangerous and harmful collection methods (such as breaking off live, fragile coral to reach hiding fish, which is illegal). Furthermore, huge percentages of the fish die during their transport, as wild caught reef fish are ill-suited for captivity.

If there wasn't an opposing side, all would be well and peaceful at sea, right? Sadly, this is not the case. There are champions who represent the grass roots effort to ban or further regulate the collection of ornamental fish, and the backers of the aquarium trade, who believe that the process is sustainable and harmless when properly practiced.

Many people feel that the trade of saltwater aquarium fish is incredibly detrimental to endemic Hawaiian fish populations as well as the fragile reef ecosystems in which they live. They fear that without a ban or much stronger regulation of the practice, some of the species unique to our waters will be, and may have already been, pushed to the brink of extinction.

Robert Wintner, better known locally as "Snorkel Bob," is a renowned leader of his conservation efforts to protect the marine ecosystem from the aquarium trade as well as protect all marine wildlife. Wintner has joined Paul Watson and his crusade to defend the marine creatures that cannot defend themselves

as a board director of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society. His mission is focused on banning the practice in Hawai'i and he has released two books this year that touch on the dark side of the business.

Neptune Speaks highlights beautiful reef denizens from Hawai'i, Palau, Fiji and St. Croix, with sharp commentary on the aquarium trade and the inherent hypocrisies of its "sustainability" efforts, and voices wilderness

values. *Flame Angels* is a fictional tale about an aging dive guide in Hawai'i, who becomes disillusioned with the islands and the increasing pressure from commercial interests like the aquarium trade. Snorkel Bob weaves a pleasant tale about the spiritual healing the underwater world can have on a life in crisis, as well as the need to protect the purity of that locale. 100% of the proceeds from book sales accrue to the campaign to stop the aquarium trade.

The sound viewpoints of advocates like Snorkel Bob are gaining traction, while aquarium trade supporters fight back against legislation that would ban the practice in all Hawaiian waters. The opposition feels that the data has been skewed and that there is little to no data or evidence that fish populations and habitats are being harmed.

They also point out the inequalities in the regulation of ornamental fish gathering versus recreational reef fishing; an unregulated practice they claim takes far more fish from the ecosystem than aquarium fisheries.

Limiting the trade to farm-raised saltwater reef fish is one compromise, but not all of the desired species can be productively raised in a farm environment, so the dispute continues.

Whether you have chosen a stance or not, it is a simple truth that the reef ecosystem in Hawai'i is a majestic, unique, and *incredibly* fragile jewel that must be carefully monitored and protected. The goal should be to implement necessary procedures to regulate and maintain a healthy population of fish, and outlaw any fishing methods that damage the rare and delicate coral habitats, as well as end all illegal collection and trafficking. All viewpoints are important to the dialogue and it would be wise for everyone to further educate themselves on the varying opinions and statistics of this significant issue for the sake of our future—and theirs (fishes).

Save our Reef Animals

Reef animals are collected by the millions every year in Hawai'i, but since less than 50% of the required collection reports are filed and none are verified against the catch, the true number is unknown. According to experts, the actual catch is estimated to be two to five times higher than what is reported.

Mortality rates are astonishing—up to 40% of Hawaii's yellow tangs will die between capture and retail, never even reaching the hobbyist. In January 2010, over 600 fish captured for aquarium trade were found dead in a Big Island harbor dumpster.

Currently, the reef fish and invertebrate collection for the aquarium trade is managed as if the resources are endless with little to no consequences to the coral reef ecosystems the fish are taken from as well as the communities and residents who rely on the healthy and beautiful reefs for their sustenance.

Because minimum sizes are desired for collection of a wide variety of fish, the removal of pre-reproductive fish and invertebrates can detrimentally affect the viability of the population as a whole. Yet, the standards are still absent for over 350 species of Hawaiian organisms collected for the marine ornamental trade.

