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Protecting Hawai'i's Reef Ecosystems from the Aquarium Trade

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Case Number # 2386

Citizens and conservation groups have taken legal action to require the Hawai'i Department of Land and Natural Resources to protect Hawai'i's reefs and coastal areas from unlimited collection of fish and other wildlife for the aquarium trade. Specifically, the groups are asking DLNR to conduct environmental reviews—including an examination of cumulative damage to the state's reefs—before granting permits that allow unlimited aquarium collection of marine wildlife in coastal waters.

Earthjustice filed the lawsuit under the Hawai'i Environmental Policy Act in the First Circuit Court on behalf of Rene Umberger, Mike Nakachi, Kaimi Kaupiko, Willie Kaupiko, Conservation Council for Hawai'i, The Humane Society of the United States, and the Center for Biological Diversity.



Aquarium collector taking fish off of Hawai'i reef. (Brooke Everett)

Aquarium collectors capture hundreds of thousands of fish and invertebrates from Hawai'i's reefs every year.

Alarming, DLNR has stated that this should be considered a minimum estimate because it does not verify the accuracy of submitted catch reports.

The collected animals are primarily herbivorous, reef-dwellers that serve unique functions in the coral reef ecosystem, such as helping to control algae growth. Studies have shown that reducing diversity of reef fish and shellfish affects a reef's ability to respond to stresses or disturbances. This is vitally important as reefs come under serious pressure from global threats, including climate change and ocean acidification. DLNR has not conducted any studies showing how its policy of handing out permits for the asking will affect Hawai'i's reefs over time.

There is currently no limit on the number of aquarium permits that DLNR can issue and no limit on the number of animals a commercial collector can take under a permit. Aquarium collection can occur anywhere in the state, except in designated protected areas, but primarily occurs in waters around O'ahu and along the west coast of the island of Hawai'i. DLNR has expressed concern in official reports over the increasing number of collectors in the state and the growing number of animals harvested from the reefs by the aquarium trade.

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