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# Snorkel Bob sheds light on fishy industry

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Robert “Snorkel Bob” Wintner is man of many passions — he’s a business owner, leader of his own nonprofit organization, underwater photographer and author. But above all, Wintner is an ocean activist.

During a telephone interview regarding his latest book, “Some Fishes I Have Known: A Reef Rescue Odyssey,” his voice conveys a great sense of urgency.

While there’s little argument that coral-reef ecosystems are on the decline, Wintner believes a loosely regulated aquarium-fish industry is the main culprit for the decreasing numbers of tropical fish in the Hawaiian islands.

“Hawai‘i may well have the last surviving reefs,” Wintner said.

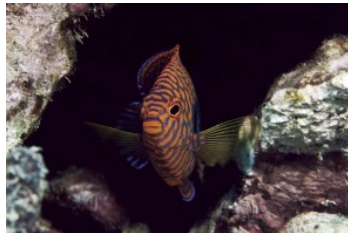
“I can point to reefs that were vibrant 10 years ago, and now they are dead.”

That is why Wintner argues that the aquarium-trade industry should be shut down, a sentiment that has made him unpopular with politicians and businesses connected to the tropical-fish trade.

Wintner says fish collectors have “carte blanche” to set up shop and take whatever fish they can grab.

“No, I don’t think it’s any way sustainable,” Wintner said about the aquarium trade industry.

“The reef is declining, and what are you going to do? Take out the critters?”



A Potter’s angelfish strikes a pose for Snorkel Bob (aka Robert Wintner). Wintner published more than 300 photographs of underwater creatures in his book ‘Some Fishes I have Known: A Reef Odyssey,’ which aims to discourage fish-collectors from catching and selling Hawai‘i’s tropical fish.

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His newly released book is a 200-page appeal to conservation.

It's filled with more than 300 color photographs snapped by Snorkel Bob himself of Hawaiian reefs he frequents.

A follow-up book, "Every Fish Tells a Story," is scheduled to be released in June 2011.

"I didn't want to write a warning book," said Wintner.

"It's not dismal or despairing. It promotes and entertains."

As the executive director of the Snorkel Bob Foundation, a conservation group that was founded in 2001, Wintner and other advocates are spearheading a campaign in Maui County to regulate fish-collecting.

Those who oppose the industry believe the state Department of Land and Natural Resources' Division of Aquatic Resources doesn't do enough to protect coral reefs.

Last August, Maui's County Council passed an ordinance that is expected to be signed into law Jan. 1.

The ordinance would hold fish-collectors accountable for tax clearances, mortality rates and humane treatment.

A second bill, which is still in committee, is focused on the humane treatment of fish and regulating how fish are caught and treated while they are transported to aquatic stores.

"We've done what the state has prevented us doing for quite some time," Wintner said.

"But the county jurisdiction stops at the high-water mark. This is all the county can do to regulate the way a business operates, or not operates."

With the recent state elections, Wintner is hopeful that under the leadership of a new governor, new legislation will emerge that facilitates reef recovery on a statewide level.

"On the state level, (Democratic) Sen. Josh Green of Kona is talking about a ban, and we like that," Wintner said.

Green is expected to introduce that piece of legislation in January, which calls for a ban on tropical-fish collecting in state waters.

"We also think we may re-introduce a really well-crafted bill we supported in 2009 for a whitelist," Wintner said.

The "we" Wintner refers to is a loose-knit group of friends and supporters "who don't get paid one dime" but believe banning fish-collecting is a vital step to restoring Hawaiian reefs.

While Wintner is actively crusading his fight on Maui County, where he resides, he said he isn't necessarily going to take his show on the road.

"We are here to make resources available," Wintner said. "The first thing any island in Hawai'i must do is recognize people who ride point on this issue."

"There's a lot of down and dirty here," Wintner said. "They are in it for the money, we are in it for the reef recovery."

Wintner owns and operates Snorkel Bob's snorkel-rental shops on all the islands, including Kaua'i shops at Waipouli and Koloa.



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