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Saving Hawaii's tropical fish and coral reefs from demise

Posted by Teri Shore on October 11th, 2010

Hawaii conservationist, author and reef photographer Robert Wintner, also known as Snorkel Bob, explained the need to protect tropical fish and corals from the aquarium trade during a media and ocean community briefing today in San Francisco. He warned of uncontrolled tropical fish collection by commercial collectors in the Hawaiian Islands.



Yellow tang, Snorkel Bob photo, copyright - do not use without permission

"The aquarium trade is a severe threat to reefs and tourism and an affront to Hawaiian culture," said Wintner, who is Executive Director of the Snorkel Bob Foundation and owner of Snorkel Bob's across Hawaii.

He recently helped establish regulations to control aquarium extraction in Maui County and underwrote legal action to protect Pacific leatherbacks from swordfish hooks in the Hawaii longline fleet. He is in the San Francisco Bay Area launch his new book, "Some Fishes I Have Known," which profiles reef fish in a social setting and underscores the threat posed by commercial aquarium extraction. [See his blog on the Huffington Post.](#) [Download his bio here.](#) [Download book info here.](#) [Download fact sheet on Hawaiian aquarium trade here.](#)

Robert explained that the incredibly bright yellow tangs that grace the cover of the book are easy to catch and often used as "loss leaders" by tropical fish stores to sell other more expensive species. Robert explained that the Kona Coast on the Big Island of Hawaii was once called the Gold Coast because yellow tangs numbering in the hundreds of thousands swam along the reefs there. Now they are mostly gone. Once captured and shipped to California or China or elsewhere around the globe, the yellow tangs usually die within 30 days of captivity. And where these fish have been decimated, coral reefs suffer and die from overgrowth of algae that the yellow tangs keep in check.

Another victim of the aquarium trade is the Hawaiian cleaner wrasse, which is considered charismatic and in demand by the aquarium trade. However, this specialized fish will starve in 30 days without 30 to 40 other fish to clean daily. Hawaiian cleaner wrasses protect reefs from parasite infestation, yet they ship out daily by the hundreds from Hawaii with no limit and no constraint.

What to do?

Robert is leading the effort to establish laws in Hawaii to regulate aquarium collection. A Maui ordinance recently adopted by the county government will take the first steps to slow carte blanche extraction.

We at Turtle Island Restoration Network support his call to rein in this trade of marine wildlife for aquariums, which is no different than any other "pet" trade - remember wild macaws and other birds being taken before laws were enacted?

Here are some other actions that we agree will help turn the tide:

1. Home aquarium collectors need to learn about the source of their tropical fish; and when the fish die, instead of replenishing, take the aquarium down for good.
2. People who love reefs and fish can replace the color and beauty in their home with alternatives like projecting lifelike images on a flatscreen TV. Have you ever seen those fake holograph fireplaces that look so realistic?
3. Set standards through state and federal for aquarium collection and if needed ban the practice to protect the health of coral reefs. With global warming, the world's coral reefs are at risk. Hawaii's could be the last intact coral reefs to survive. They should be given a chance for long-term survival.

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