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Tropical Fish dump prompts outrage

More than 600 fish found dumped at harbor

by Carolyn Lucas
West Hawaii Today
clucas@westhawaii.com
Friday, January 29, 2010 8:54 AM HST

Several Hawaii residents, environmentalists and commercial tropical fish collectors are outraged over the dumping of 610 fish, discovered this past weekend in a trash bin at Honokohau Small Boat Harbor.

Tipped off by a concerned fisherman, employees from the state Division of Aquatic Resources' Kailua-Kona office went diving in a Dumpster near a launch ramp Monday. They retrieved two bags of stinky dead fish, which were counted and examined.

Of the 610 fish, 551 were yellow tang -- a species that represents more than 80 percent of the aquarium catch in West Hawaii waters. The remaining 59 fish comprised six other species, including butterflyfish and surgeonfish. All the dumped fish had no outward signs of illness or injury, said Bill Walsh, state aquatic biologist.

Nearly half of the yellow tang were recruits, very small individuals newly settled on the reef. Recruits usually start settling in summer months and by December are larger in size, which leads the Division of Aquatic Resources to believe these yellow tangs were not collected recently. Still the state agency doesn't know who is responsible or exactly why the fish were dumped. Perhaps, a tropical fish collector collected them all at once, had a holding tank failure and disposed of the fish at the same time. Maybe an aquarium system failed or became contaminated, leading a wholesaler to store sick individuals in a freezer



Click Photo to Enlarge

Employees from the state Division of Aquatic Resources' Kailua-Kona office count and examine 610 dead fish found Monday in two bags left in a trash bin at Honokohau Small Boat Harbor. Of these fish, 551 were yellow tang -- a species that represents more than 80 percent of the aquarium catch in West Hawaii waters. BELOW: These juvenile fourspot butterflyfish collected from the Kona Coast were among the 610 fish found in the bags over the weekend at Honokohau Small Boat Harbor. - Teri Leicher, Jack's Diving Locker | Special To West Hawaii Today




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and only recently decide to dispose of the fish, Walsh said.

While not illegal, many Big Island and Oahu residents who called West Hawaii Today deemed the act a travesty or shame Thursday. They repeatedly said the magnitude of the fish killed was offensive and repugnant. Some said the license of the person responsible should be taken away because he or she had destroyed reef life so indiscriminately and mindlessly wasted fish. Others demanded Big Island tropical fish collectors and exporters develop and enforce a stringent Code of Conduct, which they must adhere to operate.

"For many, this was the tip of the thing lurking just under the surface. Locally, there have been concerns about the aquarium industry," Walsh said. "This includes issues with inconsistent, poor and absent reporting by some collectors and wholesalers. There's also the renegade element or lack of responsibility from a number of collectors who are systematically poaching fish in marine protected areas. ... Many people feel we are granting (tropical fish collectors and exporters) a tremendous privilege by allowing

them to make hundreds of thousands of dollars on our reefs and we're getting nothing in return."

Ron Tubbs, of R.T. Distributors, said the local tropical fish collectors he has conversed with are "extremely upset" by the dumped fish and hope this kind of loss never happens again.



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These Juvenile Fourspot Butterflyfish Collected From The Kona Coast Were Among The 610 Fish Found In The Bags Over The Weekend At Honokohau Small Boat Harbor. - Cynthia Hankins] Special To West Hawaii Today

"This is an isolated incident due to some kind of mistake that rarely happens," he said. "Mechanical pumps fail, big surf makes for difficult and dangerous catch returns, live wells on boats can malfunction, and pipes leak, along with other malfunctions, which could have possibly been the cause of this huge loss. Disease and catch handling were probably not at error in this case as they usually result in fewer dead fish when they occur."

While he didn't know who was at fault, Tubbs said the Hawaii Tropical Fish Association and others are trying to find those responsible. He added the local tropical fish collectors have an idea of possible culprits as very few can catch fish in these numbers.

"I am positive the huge loss of fish was not intentional. Fish collectors love the ocean and the fish. This is why we all got into the fish business," Tubbs said. "We work very hard to keep all fish alive and very healthy. Nearly all fish collected arrive to the hobbyist alive. If care is not taken, collectors do not get paid."

Randy Fernley, owner of Coral Fish Hawaii on Oahu and a Hawaii Tropical Fish Association executive member, has been collecting fish from the coastal waters of Hawaii for more than 25 years. He said his fellow association members follow a Code of Conduct. Over the past few years, he claimed a fair amount of progress had been made in regards to clearing up misinformation and addressing concerns about aquarium fish collecting. But this dumping, according to him, hinders the progress and hurts everyone in the industry.

"Whoever did this doesn't deserve to be in business," he said. "We understand the shock and dismay. Something needs to be done and the association will do everything it can to help resolve this."

David Dart, a West Hawaii



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Fisheries Council subcommittee member and tropical fish collector, said this "act of stupidity" is not condoned by the aquarium fishery. He claimed this "unusual" incident further proves that a limited entry management program for tropical fish collection in West Hawaii waters is needed. He said such a program would ensure that those participating in the industry have a high level of skill and experience, as well as are compliant with the law.



Click Photo to Enlarge

More than 600 dead fish were discovered this weekend in two bags placed in a Dumpster near a launch ramp at Honokohau Small Boat Harbor. The state Division of Aquatic Resources retrieved the fish, which were counted and examined. - Division Of Aquatic Resources Special To West Hawaii Today

In September 2008, the West Hawaii Fisheries Council approved a limited entry proposal, devised by its subcommittee and aquarium fish collectors. The proposed rule required those engaging in commercial collecting of live marine animals for sale in the aquarium trade to have a West Hawaii limited entry aquarium license in addition to a \$50 commercial marine license and aquarium endorsement. Besides ensuring a level of professionalism and skill, it strove to manage the industry by capping fishing on the reefs, enhancing the economic value of the reefs and their marine life, and providing an economic incentive to fishers to promote good stewardship of the reefs, Walsh said.

The proposal was transmitted to the state Department of Land and Natural Resources in Honolulu. Chairwoman Laura Thielen felt the state agency did not have the statutory authority for a limited entry fishery and therefore could not support any rule that proposes it. The proposal is now being reviewed by the state Attorney General's Office, Walsh said.



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There are **22 comment(s)** comments to this story.

frannysf wrote on **Jan 31, 2010 8:16 PM:**

" This is just horrible. Aquarium fish gathering on reefs should be banned. Some many of those fish die in transport or poorly maintained tanks. More money for Hawaii if they remain in the reefs for tourists (and locals!) to see and enjoy. Promote diving, snorkeling, ecoadventures. Very sad waste of beautiful creatures. "

Report Abuse

O wrote on **Jan 31, 2010 3:05 PM:**

" A stiff fine should be in order for an incident like this, perhaps \$100 per fish. I could have eaten some of that fish! I would use forensics to trace the bags for evidence, if possible. "

Report Abuse

O wrote on **Jan 31, 2010 8:36 AM:**

" A stiff fine should be in order for an incident like this, perhaps \$100 per fish. I could have eaten some of that fish! I would use forensics to trace the bags for evidence, if possible. "

Report Abuse

Lysander wrote on **Jan 30, 2010 11:19 PM:**

" Excellent comments! Keep up the momentum and contact DAR, DLNR and the West Hawaii Fisheries Council with adamant comments. You can have an impact! Do not be lulled into complacency by comments like those of Pahiki "If we make to much fuss they might take away our right to kill and abuse other resources." Ignorance is bliss. Keep fighting or there will soon me nothing left to fight for! "

Report Abuse

kunakalo wrote on **Jan 30, 2010 8:14 PM:**

" Know why the Kohala coast is also called the "Gold Coast"? No, not because of the rich people's resorts.

Once its rocky shore was lined with walls of Yellow Tang. So many millions were there that people coined this term. Now that's no more.

Ask the long time diving operators how rare certain species get: Some of those fish can't find mates anymore. "

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pahiki wrote on **Jan 30, 2010 8:01 PM:**

" one guy messed up. what all you guys perfect? As for stopping all the collections, these fish are not endangered they are just fish. What next you want to stop exporting flowers, cattle, fruits. As for NELHA they have been sucking on the public money pipe for way to long now you want them to suck more. One guy messed up bad, find him kick his butt and move on. "

Report Abuse

flappybird wrote on **Jan 30, 2010 3:54 PM:**

" Thanks for telling it like it is, Koaman. It should be illegal to collect tropical fish so some loser can look at them, as if they were a TV screen. It is sad and pathetic. "

Report Abuse

Glenn1951 wrote on **Jan 30, 2010 11:11 AM:**

" ktown you might study but you haven't learned. Big difference. "

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Local12 wrote on **Jan 30, 2010 11:02 AM:**

" Sen. Green, you hear any of this?

NELHA has plenty of available land, pumped seawater and local expertise (since there are already fish farmers there).

Due to the lack of responsible business practices of the tropical fish harvestors, time to ban it, replace with land-based farm raised fish (and the state will reap extra \$ to boot). "

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koaman wrote on **Jan 30, 2010 9:53 AM:**

" Why all the outrage for finding the fish in the dumpster now? That's where all the tropical fish taken from our waters and shipped to the mainland end up anyway. The only difference is some fish get to spend a couple years in a tank before they die. Don't people realize that all fish taken by these " Reef Rapers" have a 100% mortality rate? People would be shocked if they knew how many tens of thousands of tropicals are taken from our waters each month. It's time to ban all commercial tropical fish collecting. "

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ktownrider wrote on **Jan 30, 2010 9:47 AM:**

" i know nothing of these issues? Sunshine i study these issues continuously and see the problems face to face, now i don't know if you've ever farmed bluefin or not, obviously you have, but there are problems with the fish getting sick even in the larger pens. You might be reading something on the internet or some heresay from a buddy, but until you see some face to face i'd like you to sit down and keep believing everything you hear :) Also, they'll never completely ban tropping, any complaint and the politicians go running away. "

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Glenn1951 wrote on **Jan 30, 2010 6:49 AM:**

" Licencing is not a solution to these problems. As Local12 said a total ban on taking aquarium fish in the wild is the solution. These fish can be raised in tanks and should be.

As for ktown's rant about sport and commercial fishing he clearly knows nothing about the issue or the problems. As for farm raised pelagics he is worst than ignorant, he is misinformed. "

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jennynell wrote on **Jan 30, 2010 3:42 AM:**

" I can not believe this is happening. Why doesnt hawaii have any strict laws against this? too who ever is responsible for this, you might not see it now but when you least expect it it will come, your days of enjoyment will soon be filled with karma.Ba\$tards "

Report Abuse

ktownrider wrote on **Jan 29, 2010 6:22 PM:**

" in response to paradise96720 about the farm raising fish. the pelagic species raised in farms have a serious problem with disease, if this disease goes to the wild population without the antibiotics put in the food for farm fish, the escapees(which there always are, seriously) will get the other schools sick. Have you ever put wild salmon next to farm salmon and eaten them both? YEECCCHHH.. Besides that Dolphin in hawaii are not hunted for any dishes whatsoever, no matter what you believe. Charterboats get more money in tips when they see them. Take it from experience. :) "

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Stop! wrote on **Jan 29, 2010 6:12 PM:**

" The aquarium collectors know who did this and want to prove it, so they can burn him at the stake to absolve their sins. Aquarium collecting is the same as killing the golden goose to get at the eggs inside. It shouldn't be regulated. It should stop! These roughshod cowboys cry outrage, so they can sacrifice a scapegoat and keep the reefs EMPTY the CORRECT way. They want more money at our expense. "

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kunakalo wrote on **Jan 29, 2010 4:15 PM:**

" Across from Chevron Gas in Kealakekua is an ornamental fish dealer. Many people seem to bring their 'catch' there. They may do everything by the book, but they probably know who the 'players' are. Who are the other buyers? That's the bottle neck investigators have to look at. In the self interest of ornamental fish dealers to avoid restrictions, they need to investigate

themselves and police!

People try to make ends meet and don't know how to do it professionally. Bad things like this will happen increasingly when left by itself. "

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forthefishes wrote on **Jan 29, 2010 4:12 PM:**

" Don't be fooled by the aquarium trades so-called "outrage": in 2006 they reported that 16,214 died before being sold and in 2007 it was 20,340. The largest U.S. mainland wholesaler reported that the DOA rates of many Hawaii collector's fishes at his facility are above the industry norm of 5%, so you're looking at an additional 20,000+ dead at LAX after their flight to their new home. No aquarium hobbyist needs a reef fish more than our reefs and our people do.
Help end aquarium collecting in Hawaii now! Go to: FortheFishes.org "

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paradise96720 wrote on **Jan 29, 2010 3:01 PM:**

" I agree. These people need to be reprimanded and that stricter rules should be applied. People are getting greedy and fishing anything out there for \$\$\$\$. The dolphins are being hunted for new dishes, and now wasting the yellow tangs! The world should ban fishing all together!
No aquarium fish catching, and no edible fish catching!
Instead go with growing and raising both. That way we save our sea life for recreational use and for future generations to enjoy. If we don't protect the seaworld now, there won't be one for the future.
GO GREEN PEACE! "

Report Abuse

ktownrider wrote on **Jan 29, 2010 2:06 PM:**

" These fish are worth more alive then they are dead.. of the millions of tourists that visit the state each year, they look at these fish when they're alive and create more revenue, than some kid picking it up at the local pet store for 20\$ for his birthday. How about planting some corn? "

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ktownrider wrote on **Jan 29, 2010 2:03 PM:**

" how about getting rid of the commerical sale of billfish (marlin/spearfish/swordfish/sailfish). Limit the commerical sale of pelagic species and bottom species better. Create sportfishing liscences (no sale whatsoever). And raise the tropical liscences to an outrageous # and only allow a certain amount of permits distributed/year or month even. If anyone says, "That's all i can do" then they're lazy because there's a lot more you can do, but it's all they want to do.
Sportfishing liscence 50\$/yr
Commerical Liscence 2500\$ a year per/Person/Vessel (incl. bottomfish)
Tropical Collection liscence: 3000\$/mo/person "

Report Abuse

Legend wrote on **Jan 29, 2010 11:14 AM:**

" This is pathetic. And local12 is right-- a \$50 license isn't going to regulate anything. Whoever did this should be prosecuted-- but then I guess there are no laws against decimating the yellow tang population on the reefs, eh? I hope the perpetrator is feeling shame & also fear of being found out. "

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local12 wrote on **Jan 29, 2010 10:49 AM:**

" "The proposed rule ... aquarium license in addition to a \$50 commercial marine license "

This is disgusting.
These raiders who decimate the reef as they pillage entire stocks of fish, with a "proposed" fee of \$50. Pathetic.
This should be outlawed.
Force them to grow and raise their fish in tanks an NELHA, not raid the reefs.
Sad. "

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