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Where the Wild Things Are II

Protect reef fish and the health and beauty of our `āina.

Rene Umberger · Kihei

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#275The captive wild animal industry is alive and well right here in Maui County, as wild animals are taken from our reefs for short-lived entertainment in the Mainland aquarium hobby.

As with the animals mentioned in your piece ("Where The Wild Things Are," March 18 editorial), the Humane Society of the United States writes that reef fish have very complex needs and are not suited for life in captivity. Unlike mammals (including orcas), which typically live longer in captivity than in the wild, reef animals in confinement live only a small percentage of their natural potential. Though small in size, yellow tangs can live over 40 years on a reef. But, under the care of hobbyists, tank life is so stressful they rarely make it beyond a year.

This is evidenced by state reports documenting the capture and shipment of hundreds of thousands of yellow tangs yearly, along with hundreds of thousands of hermit crabs and tens of thousands of other beautiful, essential reef fish and invertebrates.

The Department of Land and Natural Resources (DLNR) and reef conservation organizations like CORAL and Reef Check call this industry "important" and "sustainable," ignoring the ethics and unsustainability of taking juvenile animals from their environment before they've reproduced and selling them in a disposable pet trade.

To be fair, their use of "sustainable" is the fishery definition: Take as much as possible without causing the complete collapse of the species. But there's another way of defining sustainable that permeates life here in Hawai'i. It's called malama `āina.

In an aquarium trade report, the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force writes about the "urgent need for action" and states that Hawai'i's reefs are being "severely overfished" by aquarium collectors. On the Big Island, collapsing butterfly fish populations are being scientifically monitored by state resource managers who defend the trade, saying there's no proof collecting caused the decline.

It's evident we can't depend on our state resource managers and reef conservation groups to help us out of this shameful mess. Instead, those who have aloha for these creatures, who cherish and value them, will do it.

Go to www.ForthetheFishes.org.

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