

Coral Pirates

Smuggling rare and endangered species harms the hobby and the environment.

Posted: October 23, 2009

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The Philippine Islands, part of the Coral Triangle and home to the majority of marine biodiversity, are known for their corals, such as these staghorn coral. The bleached coral in the center of this image taken in the Philippines highlights the pressures wild corals in the Coral Triangle are facing. In addition to climate change, ocean acidification and bleaching, corals have to contend with direct human impacts such as threats from tourism and illegal harvest for export. Philippine coral reefs are some of the most beautiful and diverse coral reef ecosystems on the planet.

I wasn't able to work on my 80-gallon aquarium last weekend, as I came down with a cold and couldn't muster the energy to work on my setup. I'll be at it shortly, and I'll have updates for everyone then.

In the meantime, I would like to mention the recent news about Gunther Wenzek, a German national who owns a company called CoraPet, based in Germany.

Wenzek recently pleaded guilty in the U.S. District Court for the District of Oregon to one count of smuggling coral into the United States via the Port of Oregon. His shipment contained more than 40 tons of live coral illegally transported from the Philippines, where all export of coral is prohibited.

Wenzek was on his way to the Global Pet Expo in Florida, one of the largest pet trade shows in America, when he was detained in Oregon upon his arrival.

The corals were in the genera Porites, Pocillopora and Acropora, highly desirable species that have recently appeared in the pages of FAMA and MARU.

Hobby Takes a Hit

Because of the wide interest reef aquarists have in these corals and the high price they fetch in the hobby, smuggling can pay huge dividends for those who don't get caught. However, the damage done to wild coral reefs and to the reputation of all reef aquarium hobbyists is considerable.

Put simply, every time someone smuggles coral into this country, they risk the future of the hobby. Coral smugglers are putting their own greed ahead of coral reef conservation and the interests of every reef aquarist in the United States.

The corals Wenzek was smuggling are already on the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) list, and more species are being added to CITES all the time. In fact, the United States recently proposed adding red and pink corals used in jewelry to the CITES list.

When someone like Wenzek is caught breaking international law and U.S. federal law, the aquarium hobby is put in a bad light and the potential exists for further regulation of coral imports. We want our hobby and industry to have a positive impact on reef conservation and appear in a positive light to the public at large, not to fuel environmentalist angst and hurt our ability to keep interesting and unique corals in our aquaria.

We at FAMA support CITES and responsible, legal coral harvesting and importation. I want to encourage every reef aquarist to demand responsibly and sustainably harvested coral, or better yet, captive-propagated coral, when making live coral purchases.

Organizations like the Marine Aquarium Council and various reputable coral dealers can offer guidance to hobbyists dedicated to stocking their reef aquariums with ethically harvested and imported corals.

Ultimately, it is up to each of us to know where our corals come from and how they were harvested before we buy them. Also, if you are a reef aquarist with rare or desirable coral species in your systems, consider fragging your corals and trading with other hobbyists at club meetings or trade shows. If we have enough hobbyists propagating corals in their systems, we can help circumvent the demand for large quantities of illegally imported corals.



For more information on coral reefs in the Philippines and efforts to protect corals, check out my blog entry "State of the Reefs, Addressed."

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