

H.R. 669

**FishChannel Columnist Jeremy Gosnell's View on H.R. 669.**

*By Jeremy Gosnell*

For those aquarists unfamiliar with H.R. 669 I would like to take some time to discuss this potential legislation and what it could mean for freshwater and saltwater aquarists throughout the United States. H.R. 669 stands for House Resolution 669 and has been titled, "The Nonnative Wildlife Invasion Prevention Act." As an environmentalist I can easily see how this legislation, at face value, appears attractive. Though, as an aquarist I can also see how this type of law could backfire and have dire consequences. My main concern in discussing this legislation is the potential effect to aquarists. I am not going to discuss the effects it may have on other hobbyists' animals: birds, reptiles and small animals.

H.R. 669 would re-classify the way the United States government looks at nonnative species of animals. Right now it is legal to own many nonnative fish species that have not been deemed a threat under the Lacey Act. If H.R. 669 were to pass it would become illegal to breed or sell many fish that are very popular in the pet trade. Imagine if suddenly your freshwater African cichlid fish had been deemed illegal by the United States. Sadly, virtually all species of fish, (with some exceptions), could come under fire under H.R. 669.

When we consider that the vast majority of freshwater tropical fish come from South America, Africa and areas other than the United States, it would be more than possible that most aquarium specimens would be determined illegal. On the saltwater side of the hobby it gets even worse. Many of the species of invertebrates, fish, corals and even macro-algae we keep are not native to the United States. When we consider that lionfish and Caulerpa have already caused nonnative species breakouts in Florida and California, the government may have plenty of ammunition to attack the saltwater fish trade.

The main problem with H.R. 669 is that it is far too rigid and broad. It is attacking the issue of nonnative species introduction with a hatchet not a scalpel. It forgets that severe storm events, ships dumping their ballasts, natural occurrences and other events cause nonnative species to be introduced – it isn't only the aquarium hobby. This legislation could deem a species illegal to keep even to people in an area where it would be impossible to introduce the animal into the wild. For example I live in Western Maryland, about 5 hours from the nearest beach. The nearest beach, Ocean City Maryland, could not support the majority of fish species that I keep in my tropical saltwater aquarium. It simply gets too cold there in the winter and not nearly warm enough in summer. But because the species that I keep in my aquarium could be a threat in Florida or Hawaii, (even though Florida and Hawaii are hours by plane away) the species couldn't legally be kept in Western Maryland.

People in mid-western states far from any ocean or tropical lake would be held to the same standards as those in Hawaii, Florida, Texas and other states bordering a tropical coastline would have to adhere too. While I can accept risk-based legislation that fine tunes species effects on various geographical areas, (like many of the laws currently in place) legislation this broad that gives our government a great deal of power is of concern.

So let's look at the potential benefits of H.R. 669. In my opinion there is only one. H.R. 669 may help reduce nonnative species introduction caused by the aquarium hobby. Although, responsible aquarium ownership and ethical practices would be far better at doing this than laws imposed on the population by the government.

The negative downsides are many. First, aquariums are often the gateway that introduces someone to the aquatic world. Success in the aquarium hobby (freshwater or saltwater), can foster a love and appreciation of natural bodies of water. The saltwater aquarium hobby gave me the desire to learn more about natural coral reefs and become a scuba diver. I then got involved in reef preservation and educating other divers and school children about how they can act to save coral reefs worldwide. A greatly reduced or totally diminished aquarium hobby would not have this effect at all and the only way people could experience living aquatic ecosystems would be to visit the nearest zoo or public aquarium.

Next, you would have the economic downside. The aquarium hobby is a huge revenue producer and a multi-million dollar per year industry. Companies like Hagen, Eheim, and All Glass Aquariums have been founded solely to provide for the aquarium and pet trade industries. Many small local fish shops would totally go out of business if this type of legislation were to be enacted causing serious economic harm to many families.

Finally, you would lose U.S. involvement in safe capture techniques. The U.S. would be the only country worldwide



affected by this law there would still be an international demand for saltwater fish. U.S. importers have often led the way in safe capture techniques verifying that their stock has not been collected using dynamite or cyanide. Some U.S. retailers go as far to travel to island nations and teach Pacific Islanders how to properly net-capture fish without harming reef ecosystems. It is likely that once the U.S. demand for saltwater fish stopped, so would U.S.-led responsible capture efforts.

It is clear that H.R. 669 hasn't been given near the level of thought needed for this type of legislation. To remove an income generator during an economic downturn seems crazy enough, but when compiled with other downsides it seems like madness. To think that this type of legislation is even being considered is almost Orwellian. By visiting [www.nohr669.com](http://www.nohr669.com) hopefully we can work together to insure that this bill does not pass.