

Collecting Reality

The collection of marine fish from the oceans of the world is a complicated topic.

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Q. Eighteen months ago, I moved to Hawaii's Kona coast. Until then I, like thousands of saltwater hobbyists, was ignorant of where our saltwater fish came from, and how. But no longer. Feeding the demand of the tropical fish industry is big business here. Literally thousands of fish are taken from our reefs weekly by somewhere around 150 collectors. Needless to say, this collection is devastating the reefs. Recently, two collectors were caught using bleach on the reef to catch fish — illegal, and deadly to the corals. It's my understanding that the situation is far worse in the Philippines.

The vast majority of residents want this stopped, but politics being what they are, it is still being allowed. The opposition is measurable, however, and I think in time will succeed in stopping, or heavily regulating the industry.

This brings up the question: Is destruction of reef ecosystems worth feeding a hobby? As a happy freshwater hobbyist, my position is "no." The next time someone wants to buy that yellow tang at the pet store, they should think carefully about the effect the loss of that animal from the reef represents and what the future of that reef is.

A. The collection of marine tropical fishes is big business in whatever country it occurs. In just about every instance this collection is poorly regulated, if at all. However, given the prolific nature of many of the fish collected for the marine trade, it is rare to find a species whose numbers have become threatened.

What is of much greater concern is habitat degradation and/or destruction. Logging, road building, dredging, ship groundings, watershed destruction and nutrient run-off from agriculture and golf courses are the main factors that lead to this. Destructive fishing practices, such as cyanide, bleach and dynamite, are all of great concern not only for the damage they cause to non-target fish species, but also the habitat destruction they cause. These techniques are more commonly used in the food fish industry than in the collection of saltwater tropical fish.

This brings me to your letter. To the best of my knowledge, there is no scientific evidence that shows collection has had a significant impact on fish populations on the Kona coast. I would be interested in hearing what scientific evidence you have that shows that their collection is "devastating" the reefs. Surveys done along that coastline have shown very little change in tropical fish populations over the last few decades. There have been declines in some areas, but it is not just aquarium fish, but all fish populations, that are declining. The reason: overfishing.

The fact that there is very little scientific evidence to support claims that aquarium fish are decreasing at significant rates does not mean there's no problem. This is why ichthyologists in Hawaii have been urging the state to set aside at least 30 percent of all coastlines as protected areas — to allow populations in these areas to recover and repopulate adjacent areas. This is mainly for the larger food fish species, but aquarium fish would benefit as well.

The Department of Land and Natural Resources in Hawaii has the second lowest budget of any similar state department in the U.S. It is poorly staffed, and is somewhat handcuffed in policy-making because Hawaii is the only state in the U.S. whose legislature sets state natural resource policy. However, you can make all the laws you want, but unless they can be enforced they are all but useless. Fortunately, changes are afoot, and more Department of Land and Natural Resources officers will be added in the coming year.

You appear to imply that aquarium fish collectors were using bleach to collect aquarium fish on Kona. This is not true. First of all, bleach kills fish, so this would be useless as a technique for fish collecting. Secondly, the individuals involved in the incident you mention were on the island of Oahu, not on the Kona coast — they were fishermen collecting squirrelfish for food, not tropical fish collectors. The use of chemicals in fishing is illegal in Hawaii, and these two individuals were caught and charged.

There are many legitimate and environmentally conscientious fish collectors in Hawaii, and they have formed their own association. Unfortunately, there are some who are less responsible, and it is this small fraction who may be the cause for much of the bad press associated with fish collecting. Hawaii needs stricter licensing procedures, more protected areas and perhaps quotas on certain species.

There has been an ongoing debate, at times very heated, between the dive industry and the tropical fish collectors in

Hawaii. Unfortunately, this issue has been plagued with misinformation, rhetoric and a dearth of scientific evidence. In reality, many of the best dive areas are the worst for collecting because of the topography, and the fish collectors' association is more than willing to work with the dive industry to work out a compromise. However, when emotions run high, reason and "facts" tend to get pushed to the side. We will see how the situation develops.

I am not sure where you got the figure of "thousands" of saltwater hobbyists not knowing where their fish come from. Cyanide fishing for aquarium fish in the Philippines has been known for over 20 years and has been reported in hobbyist magazines for just as long. Organizations such as Ocean Voice International and the International Marinelife Alliance, the Haribon Foundation, Aquarium Systems, the Canadian International Development Agency and others are working hard to tackle the thorny issue of cyanide use and its spread throughout the South Pacific. Hobbyists owe it to themselves and the industry to be better informed about what is going on.

Although your sentiments concerning collecting and removing fish from reefs are commendable, the fact is that healthy reefs can easily withstand their collection, provided ecologically sound techniques for collection and population management are instituted. You hold up the freshwater hobby as a better model. However, if you have cardinal tetras in your aquarium you may be interested to learn that many of these are still wild caught. Actually, many freshwater fish still are wild caught. There are also now many marine fish that are captive breed, and any readers who feel so inclined, should seek these out and only purchase captive-raised marines.