

An Alternative to Live Rock

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By Richard Harker

The reefkeeping hobby is under increased pressure to curb its use of wild-collected organisms. This is due to a growing perception that such collection is doing harm to coral reefs. While the conclusiveness of the evidence is open to debate, those leading the charge to protect the reefs seem intent on forcing more restrictive practices on collection, regardless of the persuasiveness of the evidence.

The collection of live rock is one controversial practice that may be headed for curtailment. "Wild" live rock is now protected in the United States, and its protection may spread. Some organizations are now leasing underwater areas to grow live rock quarried from ancient coral reefs now on dry land. This rock can be very useful in seeding a reef tank, and may ultimately serve as our only source of live rock.

The importance of large amounts of "live" live rock may be overstated in the hobby. Live rock seeds a new system with organisms hitchhiking on the live rock. These organisms gradually spread, so they ultimately populate all suitable areas, regardless of whether the areas started live or dead. "Starter kits" from several sources can provide a jumpstart for a reef, as can borrowing rocks from mature tanks.

Aside from the issue of protecting the natural reef, there's the issue of cost. Filling a tank with wild-harvested live rock can get expensive. If a tank can be just as successful using less live rock, combining it with a cheaper and more ecologically friendly substitute, both the hobbyist as well as the environment benefit. To that end, this month we'll look at an alternative source of rock distributed by Carib-Sea of Miami, Florida.

Carib-Sea quarries ancient (120,000 years old) limestone beds to produce what they call "honeycomb base" reef rock (see Figure 1). Humic acid-rich water has dissolved away much of the rock leaving an open honeycomb appearance much like live rock. Florida live rock from the '80s and early '90s was dense and featureless. This new rock is much more porous and varied in shapes and sizes. A box weighing 50 pounds typically holds about two dozen pieces varying from baseball to larger than soft-ball size.

Carib-Sea also distributes reef rock made of petrified corals. These rocks are denser, massive-shaped rocks made of petrified faviid corals.

Carib-Sea reef rock is harder to find than their more popular reef sands, but can be ordered by anyone selling their products. More limited access to live rock is something the hobby is going to have to get used to. Carib-Sea's reef rock is one step toward weaning the hobby of its dependence on wild coral reefs.