

FISHING: MARINE AQUARIUM BUSINESS IN THE ISLANDS

A source of income and employment

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The Pacific first became a part of the luxury aquarium trade in the 1970s. Thirty years later, the total value of aquarium exports from the region is between US\$40 and US\$60 million—accounting for about 10-15% of the global trade—and the aquarium trade is becoming an important source of income and employment for local communities in the Pacific.

For example, in Fiji alone, it provides employment for 600 people and fisheries revenue second only to tuna.

Today, the activity has spread to over 13 Pacific islands countries and territories, finding its source in unique coral reef habitats. It has even come to some of the most remote places (such as Kiritimati Island in Kiribati), where there are a number of rare or endemic fish species not found in South East Asia, the major competitor.

There are concerns that extractive wild-capture practices are causing damage to marine environments. But evidence suggests that coral reef resources are resilient and that the trade could be managed sustainably to provide Pacific islands communities with a continuing livelihood.

Tony Nahacky from Aquarium Fish (Fiji) Ltd has been harvesting corals and fish from the same area around Pacific Harbour for 24 years.

He feels that stopping the local communities from collecting marine aquarium fish in the wild may 'result in much more destructive uses of the reef to replace that income.'

A regional consultation

The Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) has been assisting the region develop management and monitoring regimes to ensure the long-term sustainability of the trade whilst promoting best eco-friendly industry practices to ensure maximum benefits from these resources.

As part of this effort, SPC and the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) hosted a sub-regional workshop in Noumea, New Caledonia in early December 2008 on the marine aquarium trade.

The workshop was a technical consultation between private stakeholders, public stakeholders and specialists from this industry in the Pacific to examine current and new issues in the trade and to identify national and regional initiatives that will ensure the long-term sustainability of this important, yet relatively unknown industry.

Emerging issues and challenges

Traditionally, the marine aquarium trade relies essentially on the capture of wild animals.

Aquaculture, however, is providing the market with an increasing range of cultured products. For example, giant clam farming has increased since the first trials in the 1980s; in 2007 over 75,000 cultured clams were exported from the Pacific.

Cultured corals and cultured live rocks are also being successfully marketed to environmentally conscious aquarists. While the culture of these products expands in the Pacific, alternative employment for people in the rural areas is being created.

Air transportation—continuing saga

The aquarium trade has a symbiotic relationship with the airline industry.

Live fishes and corals surviving on a limited oxygen supply must be shipped quickly to their destination, and the trade therefore depends on airlines to get its products to market.

At the same time, the flow of outgoing airfreight cargo provides a steady stream of business, helping these international flight routes stay afloat.

In Tonga for example, the ban on live-rock harvest caused a drop in airfreight cargo and reputedly contributed to the demise of one of the international flight connections.

Pacific exemplary practices

Certification of best practices for the marine aquarium industry was deemed a high priority by both governmental and private-sector stakeholders at the Noumea workshop. Eco-labelling can add value to consumer verifiable certified products, or at least help maintain market share.

The industry stakeholders, however, stressed a need to avoid past experiences with burdensome over-documentation and to apply certification in areas where operators already have strong commercial incentives to do well.

The SPC-based Coral Reef Initiative in the South Pacific (CRISP) has announced an intention to carry out a feasibility study in 2009 to identify possible models for certification and eco-labelling in the

marine aquarium trade, and to seek one that is most appropriate for the industry in the Pacific.

International compliance

Today's global market has made compliance and reporting increasingly stringent and complex. As aquarium products move from one country to another they must comply with the powerful UN convention on endangered species (CITES) which aims to ensure that international trade is not affecting global biodiversity.

Lately, the Pacific has been affected by temporary bans that have been imposed on some species. A factor in these bans has been poor coordination between environment departments, which typically issue CITES permits, and fisheries departments, which are responsible for the industry.

Biosecurity is an issue of increasing importance. Recently the European Commission (EC) imposed a requirement for all live aquatic imports to be accompanied by a disease certification and for the exporting countries to also be members of the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE).

The Pacific has become an unintentional victim of this new requirement. Most, if not all, of the countries affected by this ruling lack the institutional and funding capacity to accommodate these measures.

Fortunately, there are some conciliatory gestures from EC indicating that a regional approach coordinated by SPC may provide a temporary respite. However, this really only serves to raise a flag that increasingly stringent biosecurity measures in the trade are right around the corner.

What lies ahead?

With growing interests in the aquarium trade from Pacific countries, the trade is expected to continue to grow in the region.

SPC will continue to coordinate efforts and provide the technical support and assistance required by Pacific Islands nations to develop and manage this industry in a sustainable way.

A 'Pacific' label that indicates high quality eco-friendly products that promote sustainability is an idea worthy of exploration by Pacific Islands nations. And as for international trade measures, they have the capacity to either become a barrier for the Pacific marine aquarium trade or to assist the trade in keeping a clean image.

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