

CAN WE CREATE THE HOBBY WE WANT?

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The ocean is Earth's final frontier—should these boats be collecting for aquariums, catching food fish, or doing both sustainably? Image by Richard Ross.

Given the current state of the trade and hobby, it might be argued that a new and evolving mindset away from animals as ornaments and toward a more holistic approach to aquarium keeping is the necessary foundation for a healthy future.

The oceans are Earth's final frontier. Much as our relationships with other frontiers have evolved as wildernesses beyond known borders were explored, our relationship with the sea is necessarily changing as its deepest bathometric details are mapped. This change, while certainly about the physical—removing blank spots from the map—is also very much about the psychological. As the “wildness” is diminished, our attitude towards wild things often turns from one of fear and awe to a desire to conserve and appreciate. When Roman explorers returned to Rome with wild animals from far-flung corners of the newly “found” world, those animals represented the general population's relationship to wildness. While some of those animals were eventually domesticated or became exotic pets and ornamental accoutrements to the lives of the privileged, most were resigned to shortened lives as chained curiosities or participants in the condemnation to beasts (*damnatio ad bestias*—staged hunts held before massive crowds at the Circus Maximus and the Colosseum).

Throughout ancient history, people condemned to death were “thrown to the wolves” or lowered “into the lion's den.” Pitting animal against animal or animal against man remains a source of entertainment and even income in many parts of the world. Unfortunately, this illustrates an adversarial view towards our relationship with nature. For much of modern history, animals have been commonly captured from the wild for display in zoos

and public aquariums. Most recently, and not without controversy, the documentary *Blackfish* has challenged society's perception of our relationship with captive wild animals. Many marine aquarists are quick to support a film like *Blackfish* or the efforts of the Sea Shepherd Society because of their love for marine life. But are they fully connecting the dots to their own passion for keeping fish in aquaria that once swam free on wild reefs? Discussing the ethics of keeping marine aquarium fishes and other animals is a dialog that has been slow to gain traction amongst aquarists, but having that discussion may be an essential part of both the hobby and trade's future.

THE SEAFOOD ANALOG

The marine aquarium fish trade is one of the last segments of the pet trade to rely almost entirely on wild animals. In some important ways, especially insofar as wildness is concerned, the marine fish trade and the seafood trade share some striking similarities. First and foremost, once a fish is removed from an ecosystem for either purpose, it is gone from the wild forever. Like the seafood industry, the marine aquarium fish trade is largely an extractive industry relying on harvesting a natural resource. While generally considered renewable, both food and aquarium fisheries can be overfished to the point where both species and systems collapse, although the scope and scale of the seafood industry is far greater than the aquarium trade.

Another, perhaps subtler, similarity between seafood and aquarium fishes is what these animals—either on a plate or in an aquarium—represent to us. Seafood is one of the last large-scale wild animal food sources, and our relationship with seafood is very much tied up

with a perceived right to harvest and a growing desire to conserve. These two often-opposing forces trigger something in the deepest recesses of our psyche—something the contemporary notion of sustainability was created to resolve. The idea of sustainable harvest provides both a means and a rationale to continue to fish wild stocks. Not everyone agrees, however, and with ocean ecosystems generally believed to be in crisis, an increasing number of people now argue that both wild fish consumption and keeping wild fishes in aquaria should be severely curtailed, if not explicitly forbidden.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF PURSUING LUXURY

One aspect of the aquarium trade often cited as differentiating it from seafood is the idea that aquarium keeping is a luxury hobby. As such, critics of the aquarium hobby contend, the aquarium trade's impact on wild fishes and ecosystems should be subject to greater scrutiny than the seafood industry's impact. It is not uncommon, for example, to find stringent opponents to the aquarium hobby who regularly consume seafood. For many people living in developed nations—including many readers of this magazine—seafood consumption is often undertaken, however, as a kind of luxury pursuit. Certainly a great deal of readily available, inexpensive wild seafood is consumed regularly by the public because of its health benefits and ease of preparation. Perhaps nowhere is this better epitomized than in the ubiquitous can of tuna. But is ordering a nice piece of fish at a restaurant, as millions of Americans regularly do, really that different from buying an aquarium fish?

A Blue Tang (*Paracanthurus hepatus*) is one of the United States' most imported species of marine aquarium fishes. A small one retails for anywhere between \$20 and \$30, which is commensurate with a swordfish entrée at an upscale restaurant. Because the Blue Tang has yet to be bred successfully in captivity, every Blue Tang purchased at an aquarium store is harvested from the wild, in the same way every piece of swordfish is. Making the choice to purchase a Blue Tang for an aquarium or a swordfish steak for dinner is indeed often a luxury choice only considered by those who have the disposable income to do so, but that does not necessarily translate to a guilty pleasure. The aquarist, like the person consuming seafood, may, in fact, occupy a privileged position in society, and increasingly, some people choose to use this position to effect positive change.

Are fish friends or food? This rabbitfish is not only delicious, but it is often collected for home aquariums. Image by Bart Shepherd.



Do you know where your fish are collected? What difference does it make? Should it make a difference? Image by Richard Ross.

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Humans have an amazing relationship with the sea. In some places, like the Ebeye in the Marshall Islands, it is still treated as an infinite landfill—and playground. Image by Richard Ross.

Consumers increasingly now have access to information regarding where the products they consume are sourced. When it comes to wild food and aquarium fisheries, this information can allow a consumer to make a choice not only affecting the species itself but also the ecosystem from which it is harvested and the fisher and fisher communities involved. In the seafood world, this information often comes in the form of a seafood guide or app, and while far from perfect, these tools and their creation indicate an important shift in consumers' relationship to wild fishes. Unlike the Roman citizen who may have consciously or subconsciously seen a wild animal imported to Rome from the frontier as representing an omnipresent wildness from which civilization had been carved, progressive restaurant-goers today may view a wild fish on their plates as a connection to a wildness that has all but been eclipsed by civilization. Rather than the Roman reaction motivated by a wildness to be feared, conquered, and domesticated, today's enlightened consumer may be motivated more by a desire to appreciate, conserve, and nurture that same wildness.

Making a concerted effort to support sustainability is often a luxury as well. The millions of people who depend on subsistence fishing throughout the Coral Triangle, where most aquarium fishes and many fishes destined for seafood markets originate, frequently do not have that luxury. Their relationship to wildness is much different, as they are surrounded by it in a way that many people living in the developed world are not. It is not surprising then that they might view an American aquarist's relationship to a Blue Tang in an aquarium as strange, perhaps even amusing. Subsistence fishing is so often about opportunity, and a dinner plate of small reef fishes—many of the same species prized by aquarists—is not an uncommon sight in remote fishing villages.

AN EVOLVING PET TRADE

The pet trade in general has evolved from a trade largely about possessing something exotic from the wild to be displayed as a curiosity, to keeping domesticated (and more often than not, captive bred) animals as companions. The relationship between pet owner and pet has evolved to a point where doggy daycare,

organic cat food, and alternative veterinary medicine are common. Today, the pet industry is a multibillion dollar industry, with much of that money generated from dog beds, kitty-cat condominiums, and other products pet owners lavish upon their pets.

When it comes to exotic pets—those animals not indigenous to the places where they are kept—many are headed the way of other more common, long-domesticated pets, especially insofar as captive breeding is concerned. Pet birds, for example, are now primarily bred in captivity, and an increasing number of reptiles are as well. Marine aquarium fishes, on the other hand, remain a vestige of a trade that has morphed into something less about our relationship to the wild and more about the acceptable modern family structure complete with four-legged children. As such, marine

aquarists, because they remain so connected to wild animals and the ecosystems from which they originate, have an interesting opportunity.

The marine aquarium trade has always depended primarily on wild animals. This fact is becoming more widely known, discussed, and debated, with an increasing number of people pushing, both through activism and legislation, to end the wild harvest of marine fishes for aquarium use. The arguments against wild aquarium fisheries are generally two-fold. On the one hand, there is the environmental argument, which posits that tropical coral reefs are in crisis and concludes that extracting animals from these beleaguered ecosystems must therefore end. The other argument against wild aquarium fisheries is an argument about animal welfare. This argument is often based on the belief that removing an animal from the wild and placing it in a glass box for display is cruel and outdated.

The environmental argument against wild aquarium fisheries is being increasingly challenged in the scientific literature. Recent peer-reviewed papers show how sustainable aquarium fisheries can provide real economic incentive to conserve in places where conservation is difficult to accomplish through other means. Unfortunately, sustainable aquarium fisheries remain the exception rather than the norm, and the majority of aquarium fishes still originate from source countries of much concern from a sustainability standpoint. To truly address environmental concerns and mitigate anti-trade activism and legislation, the marine aquarium trade must pursue comprehensive reform.

The environmental argument against aquarium fisheries typically captures the headlines, but when one drills a little deeper into much of the anti-aquarium movement, a concern for animal welfare often emerges as the motivating factor. Even in regions where some of the best-managed aquarium fisheries are located, anti-aquarium activists still want to shut the trade down. For example, in West Hawaii's aquarium fishery, a fishery where both the data and the data-based management exist to insure sustainability, anti-aquarium trade activists want to ban collection. Their arguments



Keeping aquarium fish is often considered to be very different from eating fish, but is it really? How many fish in this Borneo market can you recognize from home aquariums? Image by Richard Ross.



Our relationship with the ocean's animals is constantly changing. Once, this lagoon ran red with the blood of hunted whales, but now is a shining example of well-managed, sustainable fisheries and an eco-tourism success where whales often choose to physically engage with humans. Image by Richard Ross.

frequently focus on post-harvest mortality and emotional appeals regarding the inhumanity of hunting gregarious fishes with which divers develop relationships. While these arguments have little to do with a fishery's environmental sustainability, they have everything to do with the trade's ethical sustainability.

ETHICS AND THE COMPASSIONATE HOBBYIST

As fewer and fewer pets originate from the wild, marine aquarists have an opportunity to leverage their trade's dependence on wild animals to benefit those animals, the ecosystems from which they originate, and the people closely associated with those ecosystems. As the scientific literature makes clear, wild aquarium fisheries can be forces for good, and the aquarium hobbyist can play a role in insuring fishery sustainability through their purchasing decisions. While this remains challenging, the aquarist committed to insuring his or her actions are not furthering the demise of species and ecosystems, as well as the exploitation of fishers, can shop from places where point-of-origin information is commonly available for each fish. For example, an aquarist can purchase a Blue Tang specifically from the Solomon Islands or Fiji rather than Indonesia, knowing the fish harvested in the smaller developing island nation is more than likely a sustainably collected animal and that the fisher and his community benefit from the fishery. The same cannot be said with anywhere near that degree of confidence about a fish coming out of Indonesia or the Philippines.

Beyond his or her purchasing decisions, today's informed and compassionate aquarium hobbyist can also rethink the daily relationship between fish and aquarist. The choices made every day in the keeping of aquarium animals can go far beyond the individual aquarium. The discussions generated are ones that can go to the very core of a better understanding of our place in the world. Things as simple as how we care for a sick fish, whether we choose to quarantine, and what risks we are willing to take with our aquatic charges can define us and our relationship to the hobby,

the trade, and the environment. Aquarists shouldn't ignore the big questions aquarium-keeping generates regardless of whether those questions arise in a hobby magazine, online in a reef forum, or even in the attacks of anti-aquarium activists.

How do aquarists want to be perceived? Is today's aquarist like the Roman citizen gawking at a chained lion led off a ship recently returned from the frontier, or is he or she more attuned to the fact that the animals in question represent a wildness that needs more attention in the face of globalized civilization and its attendant anthropogenic stressors? Are the fishes aquarists keep akin to cut flowers and kinetic art, or are they a daily connection to embattled ecosystems and citizens of developing island nations living half a world away? Do aquarists view the animals in their aquaria as curiosities, or do they see them as ambassadors of a wildness that needs to be better understood, appreciated, and preserved? Is keeping a rare species more about ego and bolstering one's own status, or is it also about realizing and valuing the remarkable diversity of life? While the psychological well-being of aquarium fishes has little impact on the sustainability of the fisheries themselves, does the compassionate aquarist's approach to the husbandry of every animal in his or her care add real, discernable value to the hobby and aquarium industry?

Given the current state of the trade and hobby, it might be argued an evolving mindset away from animals as ornaments and toward a more holistic approach to aquarium keeping is the necessary foundation for a healthy future. The oceans are Earth's final frontier, and how we interact with that frontier says something about us. Our relationship with what little wildness remains requires an attitude of good stewardship on our part, and marine aquarists are uniquely positioned to be leaders in this regard. While discussions about environmental sustainability often dominate, we are well served to also discuss and debate the ethics that govern both our individual and collective actions. Without this debate, we risk losing something elemental. We risk a return to the condemnation to beasts. 