

A SUSTAINABLE & ETHICAL MARINE AQUARIUM TRADE

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A proposal to ensure imports into the United Kingdom / Europe of all marine animals used by the marine aquarium trade are sourced ethically and sustainably

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BACKGROUND

This proposal document has been produced to ascertain if enough interest now exists for the United Kingdom / Europe to change its current unsustainable importation practises of marine animals for use in the marine aquarium trade. It is intended to help ensure the trade continues into the future but in a sustainable and ethical manner.

THE PROBLEM

The worlds coral reefs are now under extreme pressure and are drastically reducing in size each and every year. Yet, marine fish and corals are collected and removed from this shrinking resource and transported to aquarium businesses around the world. They are then sold to marine aquarium hobbyists who display and maintain these corals and fish in their aquariums.

As a note, people keep and maintain marine aquariums for the same reasons people keep freshwater tropical fish aquariums or cold water ponds. It provides them with great pleasure and expands their knowledge. By exporting these marine animals, it also provides a much needed income for some of the poorest countries around the world. However, the current practises employed collecting the vast majority of livestock is neither ethical or sustainable.

THIS DOCUMENT

This document briefly

- Outlines the proposal to change these practises.
- Highlights the growth of the trade and its increased impact on a shrinking resource.
- Highlights the resistance which should be expected when implementing change.
- Highlights the issues which would occur if a ban on importing marine animals were to be introduced.

It also assumes that the reader needs no further proof that the world's coral reefs are under major threat and that they are declining drastically each year. It therefore does not provide further proof of this fact and intends to provide a solution to the collection of marine animals for the marine aquarium trade rather than attempting to address all the issues causing reef destruction.

By creating this proposal document Reefs UK hope to highlight the issue to government and organisations which can help enforce change and ensure the marine aquarium trade continues into the future. It is in no way intended to prevent the current trade from continuing or calling for a ban. The proposal document should be viewed as the beginning of a consultation to provide a constructive roadmap for the trades future.

Throughout the proposal document, the term used for marine fish, corals and inverts will be referred to as marine animals. Also the term “UK / Europe” is used to identify if a European wide implementation is possible. Although implementing a certification scheme within the United Kingdom would be a vast improvement on current practises, if deployed throughout Europe it would relieve a major burden on the worlds coral reefs. It would also demonstrate to other countries what could be achieved and hopefully tempt these countries to implement this scheme or variations of this scheme thus further helping the worlds coral reefs.

THE PROPOSAL

Reefs UK are proposing to introduce legislation to require **all** UK / European aquarium businesses selling marine animals, to purchase these animals through an certification scheme. This requirement would apply to aquarium retailers, aquarium importers, aquarium wholesalers and public aquariums. This certification scheme will be independent of the trade and be based on the MAC (Marine Aquarium Council) certification scheme. Please refer to the Marine Aquarium Councils website for more information on the actual certification and its benefits <http://www.aquariumcouncil.org>. In addition, please also refer to the Sustainable Aquarium Industry Association (SAIA) website for details on marine animal welfare within the marine aquarium trade <http://www.saia.de.gg>.

This proposal is intended to fill a void between preventing the current unsustainable collection methods from continuing without the need for a ban on importing and selling marine animals.

Independent certification would ensure all livestock available in the UK / Europe would be sourced from a location that was -

1. Continually monitored to ensure the level of livestock is not impacting the reef.
2. Extracting the livestock using ethical and sustainable methods with low mortality rates.
3. Adding corals, fish and inverts back into the coral reefs through coral farming and fish breeding programs.

With reference to point 3, coral farms would be created in designated areas within each collection site. Corals would be fragmented / propagated and fish bred not only to supply the aquarium trade but a percentage of livestock produced from these farms would be returned to the collection site. It is hoped that by restocking the reefs from these farms would help expand the reefs and slowly reduce the decline. This has the potential to expand beyond the aquarium trade as organisations and individuals could contribute and fund local fisherman to restock the reefs rather than continually fishing them. This is a long term aim but has been included in the proposal so the trade not only stop the current collection practices but also implement a rebuilding program to reverse the decline of the reefs for future generations. Careful consideration would need to be taken on what species were returned and where on the reef they were returned to. However, expanding parts of a reef will allow existing species to establish themselves within these new zones.

THE BENEFITS

Although there are a number of problems with the MAC certification and its future, it still has the potential to deliver a first class solution to the problems that surrounds the supply of marine animals. By legislating that all aquarium businesses have to use this certification scheme to source livestock, it provides the following benefits -

- Guarantees animals have been collected sustainable and ethically from collection to resale.
- It creates the demand for the “products” (which MAC has struggled to do).
- Through its certification, it generates income for MAC to sustain its operations without allowing aquarium businesses any influence over its standards.
- MAC has years of experience and has already invested heavily in the start up operations and infrastructure costs same result.

THE CHALLENGES

There will be many challenges to overcome in implementing such a scheme including -

- MAC will require funding and further expansion of its supply chain.
- MAC may need to change some of its standards to ensure its “products” can be delivered on the scale that would be required.
- Initially, supplies of certified marine animals could not meet demand. However, collectors, with the help of the certification program, would quickly adapt as their current market would shrink in size. The demand for MAC certified marine animals would explode so market forces would come into play with supply following demand.
- There would be problems bringing new collectors on line quick enough due to training and resourcing checks.
- Prices of livestock would increase and in some cases drastically increase. However, as with all markets, as more collectors competed in the “MAC certified market”, competition would force prices down. It is our belief that prices for marine animals will remain higher than they are now due to the overhead of certification checks. However, this is a small price to pay for sustainability.
- There may be huge resistance from many in the aquarium trade as it would be moving them from the situation of today where businesses can import what they want without knowing how it was collected, to careful policing of the collection and supply of marine animals. Many businesses may not want this level of checks and balances but we must remember that these businesses trade animals living on delicate ecosystems which are under great threat.

THE FUTURE

It is our belief that over the next few years, scientists will discover that ever more species of marine animals are becoming endangered. These endangered species will then be added to the CITIES list for protection with trade regulations preventing the collection of these animals. Over the coming years, the trade will have fewer animals to trade thus reducing revenue for both the countries exporting and importing marine animals. More importantly, banning the collection of marine animals because they have become endangered is a reactive state. By implementing a certification scheme now, we turn a negative reaction into a proactive change which will contribute to the reefs survival.

We need to move to a position of viewing the collectors of marine animals as the caretakers of our coral reefs in the same way we have long viewed farmers as the caretakers of our countryside. There is now growing concern that unless enforcement of new practises are imposed, not only the possibility of keeping marine animals in aquariums will become a thing of the past, but the coral reefs themselves will not be cared for and continue to rapidly decline.

Any future certification scheme must remain independent of the trade to ensure there is no conflict of interest. The trade has made minor improvements to date but there is no independent checking of these improvements. The proposed certification scheme is not only certifying the sustainable collection of marine animals, but the proactive rebuilding of the coral reefs by adding back more marine animals than removed.

A GROWING TRADE

So why is this needed now? Well, over the last decade, the marine aquarium trade has continued to grow with many more people keeping marine aquariums than ever before. With the improvements in technology, the reduction in costs and the ease in keeping marine animals in aquariums, it is fair to assume that the hobby will continue to grow well into the future. The trade in the UK alone now provides -

- Three magazines dedicated to the subject of keeping marine animals in captivity and existing fish keeping magazines allocating more of their magazine space over to marine aquarium sections (please refer to Appendix I).
- New dedicated marine aquarium retailers are being opened throughout the country and many existing aquarium retailers now stocking at least some marine aquarium animals.
- More UK based Internet discussion forums than ever. When Reefs UK in 1992 (<http://www.reefsuk.org>), there were only 2. There are now several with very healthy membership levels (please refer to Appendix I).

In addition, the hobby has been further fuelled by -

- The availability of cheaper aquarium equipment produced in China and smaller cheaper “nano” aquariums enabling many more people to afford a “slice of coral reef” in their home.
- The film Finding Nemo beamed onto the cinema screens and into homes providing much exposure to marine aquariums.
- People holidaying in exotic locations, viewing the stunning beauty of coral reefs and wanting to keep this magical view once they have returned home.

It has never been cheaper or easier to enter the hobby and keep marine animals in captivity. It is important that people are interested in coral reefs and feel connected to these ecosystems. It is also beneficial that they have so many resources to utilise and have far more chances of success keeping the animals healthy. However, because the demand has increased significantly, the hobby requires more and more livestock from a source which is without doubt, declining rapidly.

Not a year goes by without a new report being published demonstrating the destruction of coral reefs. The marine aquarium trade is in no way the sole contributor to reef destruction with tourism, climate change, pollution, fishing etc. being major contributors of destruction (naming just a few!). Also, if managed correctly, the marine aquarium trade could play a major part in conserving the worlds reefs. However, although the marine aquarium trade has made some progress towards sustainability, it has been slow and disjointed. There is little evidence that this is changing and we believe it is now unethical for the UK / Europe to continue to allow the trade of marine animals without enforcing some restrictions. Reefs UK believe that the UK / Europe cannot simply keep generating income from a source which is endangered.

RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

As the supply of marine aquarium animals into the UK / Europe is a business, there will obviously be resistance to such a certification scheme and the impacts it will have sourcing marine animals. Over the years, many arguments against change have been put forward by parties who have an interest in preventing change but the fact remains that the very source of supply to these businesses is rapidly diminishing so change is inevitable. Recommending an independent certification scheme is a positive change whereas waiting for the worlds coral reefs to come under extreme pressure thus banning imports of marine animals does not help the UK / European economy nor the economy of the developing countries which supply the marine animals. More importantly, resistance to change does not help prevent the deterioration of the worlds reefs. Listed below are some of the arguments against change and a response to these arguments.

NO IMPACT

Businesses within the marine aquarium trade have argued that they cause little if any impact to the coral reefs therefore, there is no reason for change.

The very fact that the aquarium trade removes marine animals from a coral reef must have an impact. By removing a single marine animal from an already endangered coral reef, adds additional stress factors to that reef impacting the future viability of its survival. Unfortunately, the marine aquarium trade does not remove a single animal but removes tons globally each year. It maybe true that the marine aquarium trade is not a major cause of reef destruction but it is an area that if controlled by certification, would not only remove one of the burdens placed on our reefs, but would actually contribute to help its survival as fisherman would be farming the reefs responsibly.

WE ARE NOT THE MAIN CAUSES OF REEF DESTRUCTION

It has been argued that reef destruction from climate change, pollution, tourism etc. have far greater impacts on the worlds reefs and that these other areas should be resolved first before making any changes to the marine aquarium trade.

There are two responses to this resistance to change. Firstly, these other areas are now being addressed. Climate change is now recognised as a major world problem with governments actively attempting to reduce CO2 emissions. Pollution problems around the world are slowly being addressed with ever tighter legislation being introduced making it unacceptable to pollute rivers and seas. Industries, business, governments are all beginning to make changes however small to address these issues. However, the marine aquarium trade has done little to remove the impact they are having on the worlds reefs. Secondly, we know the world reefs are under great pressure so every effort should now be used to remove the burden we place on coral reefs regardless how small. As the marine aquarium trade rely so heavily on coral reefs for sourcing marine animals, they should be at the forefront in the fight to protect the reefs.

UK / EUROPE ARE NOT THE BIGGEST TRADE

It has been highlighted that the US provides by far the greatest trade of marine animals and that without the US changing its buying habits, the certification scheme would have little impact.

Regardless of what other countries are doing, the UK / Europe needs to ensure it trades ethically. Within the UK / Europe we could lead the way and show other countries the benefits of implementing the certification scheme has on the worlds reefs. Countries choosing to continue trading in unsustainable and unethical practises cannot continue indefinitely. Also, the UK EU should not need to wait for the US before making a decision!

AWARENESS IS BAD

Another area of concern from the marine aquarium businesses is that raising the subject of improvement may backfire and bring focus on the trade with the possibility of banning the trade or restricting the trading of marine animals.

Ironically sitting on our hands and continuing along the current path will indeed cause these to occur for two reasons. Firstly, more and more research is proving that certain species of marine animals (especially hard corals) are becoming endangered. Therefore, there will be further restrictions through CITIES to ban the collection of these animals which will lead to a reduction in their availability. Secondly, with an ever decreasing habitat, eventually it will become internationally unacceptable to remove anything from these ecosystems so a ban will become into force as a last ditch attempt to protect the reefs. With the current rate of reef destruction, this is not “if this will happen”, but “when it will happen”.

JOBS WILL BE LOST & BUSINESSES WILL FAIL

Please see above. Unless the aquarium trade changes, this is a certainty! Ironically, a certification scheme will actually help prevent this from happening!

THE TRADE IS CHANGING

Marine aquarium businesses will argue that they are making changes and self regulating.

It is true that the trade as a whole has made minor improvements over the last decade. Animal welfare has improved considerably with the ability to keep most of the imported marine animals in the very best of conditions. This has been down to improvements in equipment, improvements in the shipment of marine animals and better understanding of the animal's requirements. However, the single most important issue regarding the supply of sustainable livestock has not been addressed. Although some businesses advertise they are sourcing livestock sustainably, it does not provide independent proof. Currently, there is no single label that a hobbyist can rely on when purchasing livestock.

LONGER SURVIVAL RATES IN CAPTIVITY

It has been argued that most marine animals live longer in an aquarium than they do on a coral reef and therefore, the trade is actually helping marine animals survive longer by removing them from their unstable environment!

Using an example such as arguing that a single marine fish and keeping it in captivity for 8 years when it may have only lived in its natural environment for 2 years would show a complete ignorance of the food chain. Removing a smaller fish from a coral reef deprives a larger fish of a meal, so although the smaller fish lives much longer, we are depriving the larger fish a natural food source to live longer. Obviously this argument is nonsense and we should allow nature to continue to dictate the rules of life for marine animals. It is however, our responsibility to ensure the best welfare of the animals we remove which the certification would provide. Any removal of marine animals disrupts the habitat and the home of these animals and so we need to ensure we cause as little disruption as possible.

IMPACTS OF A BAN

The marine trade as a whole have always been incredibly concerned that any legislation or certification could lead onto a total ban. As mentioned previously, by not ensuring the hobby is sustainable will certainly end in a ban in long term as the worlds coral reefs struggle with ever increasing demands placed on them. Introducing a mandatory certification scheme will not only contribute to the long term survival of coral reefs but will also reduce the chances of such a ban. The mandatory certification is not intended to stop the trade selling marine animals but to ensure it does so in an ethical and sustainable way. Banning the importation of marine corals would have detrimental effects including -

RETURNING TO DAMAGING PRACTISES

It has long been known that fisherman in developing countries can earn more money supplying fish and corals to the marine aquarium trade than they do from supplying fish to the food trade. If we remove the marine aquarium demand by introducing a ban, there is a real concern that these fishermen will return to the damaging practises of catching fish by cyanide and dynamite or help dredge the reefs to make way for hotel swimming areas. Using cyanide and dynamite to fish, has the effect of easily producing fish for their catch but causes disastrous damage to the surrounding reef. Allowing fisherman to take care of the reefs and teaching them to farm the reef responsibly, not only provides these fisherman with a good livelihood but prevents reef destruction and over exploitation thus offering protection to the reefs. Banning does not address how developing countries would recover from this loss of income. If we restrict our own supply to only those types of countries which choose to farm their reefs responsibly, it increases demand of such operations.

THE ECONOMIES OF DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Most of the corals supplied to the marine aquarium trade come from much poorer countries than ours. As mentioned above, preventing fisherman from supplying the marine aquarium trade with marine animals has an instant impact to their income and that of the country. Introducing a certification scheme not only solves the problem of sustainability and caring for the worlds reefs but also helps these countries build on an existing trade providing them income and lifting many families out of poverty. A certification scheme would provide these countries with a viable income well into the future.

THE UK / EUROPEAN ECONOMY

Implementing a ban will not only have an impact on the countries which supply the livestock but will also have an impact on the businesses selling not only the livestock but the equipment used to keep these animals in captivity. Many businesses now exist in the UK / Europe manufacturing and selling the products used within the hobby. Not only will jobs and businesses be under threat but it will also have an impact on the tax generated from these businesses.

Appendix 1

Marine Aquarium Magazines

Magazines dedicated to the marine aquarium hobby in the UK.

Magazine	Contact
Marine World	Tel: 01706 224 370 Web: http://www.marineworldmagazine.com
Ultra Marine	Tel: 0845 0039112 Web: http://www.ultramarinemagazine.co.uk
CORAL	Tel: 01832 737523 Web: http://www.midlandreefs.co.uk/xcart/home.php?cat=248
Practical Fishkeeping (not dedicated magazine)	Tel: 0845 1204600 Web: http://www.practicalfishkeeping.co.uk

UK Dedicated Internet Discussion Forums

Just a small selection of active UK marine aquarium forums.

Reefs UK	http://www.reefsuk.org
UltimateReef	http://www.ultimatereef.net/
Marine Fish UK	http://www.marinefish-uk.co.uk
MarineFishForum	http://www.marinefishforum.co.uk/
Reefcove	www.reefcove.co.uk/
Reefpark	www.reefpark.net