



WSI CULTIVATED FRAGS IN A GROW-OUT AREA ON A FIJIAN REEF. PHOTO: COURTESY OF WALT SMITH INTERNATIONAL

This statement was made despite the fact that the largest exporting facility in Fiji, Walt Smith International (WSI), was actually established in 1996 following an invitation from the Ministry of Fisheries itself! This was followed by widespread national and international recognition for WSI's reef conservation activities, and numerous major awards, including the Fiji Export Council Unique Exporter Award in 2011. Further, the company appears to have received strong support from the Ministry's managers for about 20 years.

Added to this, since 1998, the WSI-inspired/founded ADE Project (Aquaculture Development for the Environment – www.adeproject.org) has been funding training and capacity building efforts for local community reef restoration projects. Prominent among these is the replanting of coral reefs with coral frags cultivated for the export market. Interestingly, only a low percentage of the frags cultured for export (about 10%) can actually be exported, e.g. because they may have grown too large during the period of cultivation, with the remaining 90% being replanted on the reef itself. This results in more coral mass being restored to the wild than was originally removed as small frags for cultivation. So, the trade in corals from Fiji actually results in benefits for its reefs.

Therefore, rather than cause damage to Fiji's reefs, the ADE project is an excellent example of a win-win situation from which all parties benefit. Unfortunately, the ban put all the good work of the last 20 years in jeopardy, and within a few days of the announcement, WSI had to lay off three quarters of its workforce

which, in turn, would have had knock-on effects, probably even leading to the 'death' of the ADE project and all its conservation benefits for Fiji.

And we are not just talking of conservation benefits either. The fact is that Fiji's coral/live rock industry generates millions of dollars for the economy, as well as provide jobs for large numbers of locals who would become jobless, with all the socio-economic problems that this would begin causing in the near future. The government's decision, thus, defied all logic, while the above-quoted pronouncement from the Ministry regarding its reasons, seemed to lack coherence and sense.

Obviously, WSI did not take the matter lightly. It immediately began holding talks with Ministry representatives and invited them to visit WSI's premises to see for themselves how efficiently and conservation-friendly the operation really is, and how much revenue it generates for the nation's coffers and its workforce. Quite clearly, WSI's prompt actions, allied to the support that it received from the industry, including letters to the Fijian authorities from – among others - Dr Bruce Carlson of the Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources (who, themselves, are currently involved in a serious and uncalled-for battle regarding the state's own fishery), proved fruitful, with the result that the authorities were open-minded and 'big' enough to accept their unfortunate *faux pas* and acted immediately to reverse their decision.

They, quite simply, didn't have all the relevant information at their disposal when they decided to issue the ban. Indeed, they had thought that, while banning live coral and live rock exports, there was still a viable alternative for the Fijian sector: the export of aquacultured and/or captive-bred equivalents and man-made live rock. Again, this may not sound too unreasonable at first sight, or to the uninformed, but it is. For a start, cultured corals begin with frags collected from the wild, so this practice would have had to cease. Then, man-made alternatives account for only 20% of all export trade. And if this were not enough, we are nowhere near being able to 'breed' corals in captivity. So, whichever way we

look at it, the Fiji industry would have been dealt a major, unwarranted and potentially terminal blow by the ban.

While live coral and live rock exports have been given the green light once again, we are not out of the woods yet. As you will see from the text of the Ministry's original announcement which I include below, Point No. 2 states that live coral and live rock would be given a "zero quota for 2018" under the ban. This, of course, will not be the case now. However, the Fijian Department of the Environment will have to hold a CITES Management Authority (MA) meeting to establish these quotas, something that could take months. We can only hope that, when they do, they don't commit another major error and end up allocating unworkable quotas that will do little or nothing to restore Fiji's universally respected and flourishing industry. ■

MINISTRY'S FULL ANNOUNCEMENT

The Ministry of Fisheries has banned all harvesting, purchasing, sales and export of live coral and aquarium rock (also known as live rock, coral rock or fossil coral) from the 28th of December, 2017. All companies are to adhere to the following:

1. All harvesting, purchasing and sales of live rocks and live coral are now banned, and no export permits would be processed by the ministry.
2. The Convention in International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) Scientific Committee (SC) will be submitting to the Management Authority (MA) on 7th January 2018 that Live Coral and Live Rock is given a zero quota for 2018.
3. The Ministry of Fisheries and both the CITES MA and SC would be supporting the development of other sustainable options, particularly the development of farmed or cultured coral.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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FURTHER READING

For rapid online reporting on this issue, please consult: www.reef2rainforest.com/2018/01/05/flabbergasted-in-fiji-coral-live-rock-exports-in-limbo-for-2018/