



Research suggests collection of between 5 percent and 25 percent is sustainable for the various reef species

As many readers of this column know, the Hawaiian marine ornamental fishery has been at a virtual standstill since October 2017. This is when commercial fishing permits were suspended following a Supreme Court ruling that they did not comply with the requirements of the Hawaii Environmental Protection Act (HEPA).

Some limited collection did continue for a while, taking advantage of certain legal loopholes, but with considerable complications. Then, in January 2018, the main loophole was closed and all fishing activity ceased. So, as from then, the Hawaii marine sector has been completely paralysed, with the suspension of no fewer than 233 permits, pending the results of an environmental review, which got under way within weeks of the closure. By the end of March, the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council (PIJAC), who have been working away in the background alongside Hawaii's fishers, announced that two Draft Environmental Assessments (DEAs) had been prepared and that they were in compliance with the HEPA. On 8 April, the State of Hawaii published the two reports relating to the two main islands around which fish are collected: Oahu and Hawaii.

The main conclusion with regard to the marine ornamental fishery is that it "has no substantial impact on the coral reef ecosystem of Hawaii" and that its closure would result in the loss of over \$2 million in annual revenue to the state, as well as 266 jobs.

As PIJAC's Vice-President of Government Affairs, Robert Likins, points out, "We worked hard to find and consider all available data on the fishery so that the best science was involved in its (*the DEAs*) preparation. We were unable to find any research which shows that the aquarium fishery is depleting the reefs, and two studies have concluded that the fishery has no significant impact on coral or the reef ecosystem."

Interestingly, the study also found "collection rates of less than 1 percent of the population of 37 of the allowed aquarium fish species and less than 5 percent of the other three species around Hawaii island. Research suggests collection of between 5 percent and 25 percent is sustainable for the various reef species."

The public comment period closed recently and we now await a decision on whether to retain the closure or re-open the fishery. It would not seem unreasonable to conclude that, faced with so much data supporting the view that Hawaii's fishery is perfectly sustainable, the relevant authorities will find it relatively easy to call off the suspensions and re-open the sector. But...and it's a very important 'but'... there are highly influential interests at work that sensationalise the issue, accusing the industry as "strip mining the reefs" and dealing in the "trafficking" of fish.

Although such emotive claims are made in the face of science-based evidence that points firmly in the opposite direction, there can be no doubt that the agencies involved, including the Humane Society of the

United States, are very effective in getting their messages across. It was, after all, such organisations who directly influenced the Supreme Court ruling that has resulted in the current situation. Not surprisingly, they have begun raising objections to the DEAs, so, while there is cause for some optimism, there is also considerable apprehension within the industry, as experience has taught us that not every decision affecting our sector is taken as objectively as it should.

There is also a new cause for worry that highlights the influence of the anti-trade campaigners, and which could have a knock-on effect on the industry. It concerns a further 'victory' for the campaigners who have managed to get Hawaii's First Circuit Court to invalidate all recreational aquarium fishing permits. These permits allowed individuals to collect up to five fish per day for their own home aquariums, but, now, the Court says that their activities do not comply with the HEPA (the same Act involved in connection with the industry suspensions).

Incomprehensively, some would say, the ruling does not apply to recreational fishing with hooks or spears. So, while aquarists are not being allowed to collect small numbers of fish to be kept alive in their home aquaria, fishermen are being allowed to kill as many fish as they want! Where is the logic in this?

Ah, well, as we have come to realise over the years, logic and common sense give no guarantees of any kind! ■

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