

Debate an Environmental Issue

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Should the sale of tropical fish be banned?

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JOHN DICKSON—GETTY IMAGES

Off the coast of Hawaii's Big Island swim masses of colorful fish. Some of these fish will be scooped into nets, shipped off, and sold. They will end up in aquariums around the world. Should the exotic fish be sold in pet stores? Or is the industry putting populations of the fish at risk?

Scientists who have studied the Big Island fishery say it is well managed. Rules put in place more than 15 years ago have helped to protect the fish. Along 35% of the coastline, for example, fish collecting is banned. Two years ago, the state cut the number of fish species that could be taken for the aquarium trade from hundreds to just 40.

These rules, scientists say, are working. A recent report shows that yellow tang, which makes up 84% of the aquarium catch, is growing in population. Their numbers have increased by 65% in protected areas. Over the entire West Hawaii coast, the yellow-tang population has increased from 1.3 million in 2000 to 3.6 million in 2013. "Even though yellow tang is the number-one targeted fish, there are still millions out there," Bill Walsh told TFK. He is a marine biologist who wrote the recent report on the aquarium industry in West Hawaii. "This is a healthy population of fish. They are replenishing themselves."

Conservationist Robert Wintner, also known as Snorkel Bob, objects to Walsh's findings. Wintner, who owns snorkel shops across Hawaii, started the Snorkel Bob Foundation to protect the island's coral reefs. He says he simply doesn't see yellow tang outside of the protected areas. "There should be millions of them," he says. "Where are they?"

Wintner says people believe the numbers in reports. But not many people have actually dived into the coral reefs to see for themselves how many fish can be found there. According to Wintner, the coral reefs along the coast should be teeming with yellow tang, but they are "virtually empty." Empty reefs are not good for tourism, Wintner points out, which generates \$800 million yearly. By contrast, the aquarium-fish trade generates just \$2 million yearly.

Environmentalists say another problem with the aquarium-fish industry is the way fish are handled. They must go without food for days and are shipped in too little water. "It's like living in a Dixie cup," Wintner says, "just to save some money on shipping."

Debate Organizer

Debate Question: Should the sale of tropical fish be banned?

My answer **before** reading the article and why: _____

People for tropical fish sales say:	People opposed to tropical fish sales say:
My classmate _____ says:	After hearing all sides, I say: