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New Research: Half of Saltwater Aquarium Fish in U.S. Exposed to Cyanide as Part of Capture for Pet Trade

LOS ANGELES – More than 50 percent of saltwater aquarium fish tested after purchase from US retailers and wholesalers showed signs of exposure to cyanide, a fishing technique that's decimating coral reefs, according to a new study. The findings by the non-profit For the Fishes and the research institute Haereticus Environmental Laboratory come amid new concerns over increased sales of royal blue tang and other tropical fish following Disney/Pixar's release of its new film *Finding Dory*.

Cyanide is used in illegal fishing operations to capture wild fish for sale to public aquariums and hobbyists around the world. The poison stuns the fish, making them easier to catch, but the exposure typically proves fatal to a majority of fish within 3 weeks of exposure, often after they have been sold as pets. The effect of the cyanide on coral reefs is almost instantaneous, causing corals to bleach and increasing their susceptibility to infectious diseases.

"Cyanide is a chemical weapon of mass destruction, and its use devastates coral reefs and fish," Dr. Craig Downs of Haereticus Environmental Laboratory said. "Cyanide fishing can affect the health and livelihood of the fishermen and coastal communities in which they live. Brief exposure to cyanide can mean life or death for coral reefs already stressed by this year's El Nino. The use of cyanide is completely unnecessary and its use is solely for an unsustainable profit."

The Center of Biological Diversity estimates that [tens of millions of fish](#) may be exposed to cyanide during capture each year. Notably, the "Dory" fish tested positive at a very high rate in the research. Its populations are considered highly vulnerable as the release of *Finding Dory* on June 17 is expected to drive demand for the fish as pets. After the 2003 release of the film *Finding Nemo*, wild clownfish capture and sales soared. While many clownfish are bred in captivity, blue tangs can't be successfully bred in captivity and must be caught in the wild.

"Most people have no idea about the environmentally destructive and inhumane practices that popular aquarium fish like the blue tang are exposed to. We are asking people not to buy wild-caught fish for this reason," Rene Umberger from For the Fishes said. "Dory needs to stay in the wild and alive."

The first public dissemination into the prevalence of cyanide in fish will be presented during the International Coral Reef Symposium in Hawaii later this month (19-24 June) and will reinforce calls for greater action to be taken to stamp out the cyanide practice.

The US, EU, Japan and China are the world's major consumers of ornamental fish and corals but end users rarely know that their new pets may have been obtained through illegal and highly destructive means that result in premature death to these animals. An award winning app called Tank Watch helps consumers avoid buying wild-caught fish for their aquariums.

The species found with the highest rate of cyanide exposure was the Green Chromis which [ranks number one](#) in the global marine aquarium fish trade.

The areas most commonly targeted with this form of fishing are the [Philippines and Indonesia](#), which together [account for over 80% of U.S. imports](#) for marine aquariums.

Martin Moe, author of the first and still foremost saltwater aquarium books of all time and one of the premier coral reef restoration culturist in the world added: “In 1972, it was almost impossible to buy a clownfish that was not collected with cyanide. Despite great educational and legal efforts to eliminate cyanide collection of marine tropical fish for aquariums and the dinner table, not much has changed in 2016. Monetary reward from the point of final purchase still powers this practice. Quick and easy identification and elimination of cyanide collected fish from the market is now possible and elimination of the money stream at the final purchase point is the only way that this reprehensible, environmentally destructive practice can be eradicated.”

Teresa M. Telecky, Ph.D., director of wildlife for Humane Society International, said: “The use of cyanide to catch wild fish from coral reefs for the aquarium trade is inhumane, environmentally destructive and illegal. We urge people not to buy wild-caught fish for their aquariums.”

Nicholas Whipps, Center for Biological Diversity: “It’s ironic that people’s appreciation of these beautiful tropical fish is killing them and their environments. We want people to understand that connection, and we expect the United States government to confront illegal cyanide fishing by testing the fish we import. Let’s protect Dory, Nemo, and the consumers who adore them.”

Clifford Warwick of the Royal Society for Public Health in the UK said:

“The coral reef fish trade represents one of the worst abuses of animals and nature for one of the most frivolous of reasons – live ornamentation. Whilst the poisoning of our oceans in the course of profit is not new, the cynical use of cyanide by the pet fish supply industry, and thus their attacks on whole ecosystems, marks a form criminality that transcends law.”

Monica Biondo, marine biologist at Fondation Franz Weber, has done in depth research of the trade in marine ornamental fishes said: “The endangered Banggai cardinalfish, damselfishes as well as the key species Bluestreak cleaner wrasse are among the most imported groups into Switzerland. As long as there are no proper monitoring systems in place this trade will remain a black box. Almost all fishes are caught in the wild and the mortality in this complex supply chain is enormous. In view of the destructive practices of this trade, instead of keeping coral reefs in tanks, new technologies can provide better and more fascinating experiences of coral reefs: www.vision-nemo.org.”

These findings follow a petition submitted by The Center for Biological Diversity, For the Fishes, and The Humane Society of the United States/Humane Society International on March 9, 2016, to three federal agencies to use their authority under the Lacey Act to halt these illegal imports and asks that imports of tropical aquarium fish be tested for cyanide exposure in order to enter or be sold

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