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Trade of corals

Aquaculture Department, Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center

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TRADE OF CORALS

Illegal Coral Trade

The consumer demand for "exotic" decorative items for the home (for aquarium use for instance) has given illegal traders the market they need for smuggling corals out of the country.

The value of raw corals traded in 1988 was placed at about \$500,000 which are distributed to various buyers, the U.S. being the major importer. And the Philippines has continued to be the major supplier of raw corals to the US market wherein 413 tons of raw corals were exported.

Last year, Traffic-USA, the wild-life trade monitoring arm of World Wildlife Fund-USA had uncovered illegal trade involving \$125 million worth of corals entering the United States from the Philippines despite the complete ban on exportation of raw corals since 1977.

An examination of US import documents show that corals sometimes leave the Philippines disguised as "shellcraft" and some of the permits that accompanied recent shipments may have been forged.

The Coral Market

Of the country's rich coral collection, there is a great demand for the following:

- i) Porous or stony corals (e.g., mushrooms, brownstems, brain, antler, and finger corals) are the common rocklike ornaments found in aquaria. In ground form, they may also be used for building purposes and as mixture for fish meals due to their calcium content. Harvest of this type of corals is totally banned.
- ii) Precious or hard corals are mainly black, pink, and red corals. These are the types which are processed into chokers, pendants, belts, and inlays in shellcraft. These and item iii are allowed for trade only in the processed form under a special permit system.
- iii) Princess corals are also used in shellcraft; e.g., in the stems of floral designs for tables, trays, wall frames, and dividers. Related to these are the "sea fans" which are small treelike ornaments put in aquaria.

At present, the precious corals in the local market are presumably imported. No firm has been issued the special permit for harvest of precious and semi-precious corals by the Management Authority for Marine - Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR).

The biggest market of semi-precious and non-precious corals is the Zamboanga-based trade. It caters to two major consumers: the local or domestic consumers (10%) and the foreign importers (90%). Of the foreign market, the United States is the biggest customer (56% of coral imports), followed by Europe (33%), Japan (8%), and the rest of Asia (3%).

Ecological and Economic significance of Coral Reefs

Besides trade value, corals, particularly reef builders, have immeasurable economic and ecological importance for people. The immense coral structure protects the coastal areas from the effects of waves and storms. Coral grazing by fish likewise contributes to sand formation and deposition by creating a natural dynamic balance on many beaches and by lessening the occurrence of massive erosion. Various non-food items such as building materials, industrial, and pharmaceutical products may also be derived from the reefs. The natural habitats are also magnificent tourist drawers, and therefore help boost the country's tourism industry.

But the importance of reefs lies in what they contribute to man in terms of basic food items like fish, crabs, molluscs, and seaweeds. Since the coral reefs serve as spawning, feeding, and nursery grounds for fishes, crustaceans, echinoderms, and other smaller marine creatures, it is estimated that a good reef may produce up to 30 tons of fish per square kilometer per year. There are studies indicating that reefs produce greater volumes of food than an agricultural land of equal area. Sadly, though, a 1981 survey showed that only 5% of the country's reefs remain in excellent condition and capable of producing such volume of fish.

Laws, Rules, and Regulations on the Trade of Corals

The overharvesting of corals, particularly reef building corals (ordinary or stony corals) has affected the coastal fishing industry of the country and in an attempt to minimize the destruction and further depletion of coral resources, the Philippine government, specifically BFAR, banned the collection and export of both raw and processed "ordinary" or stony coral and all raw precious and semi-precious corals.

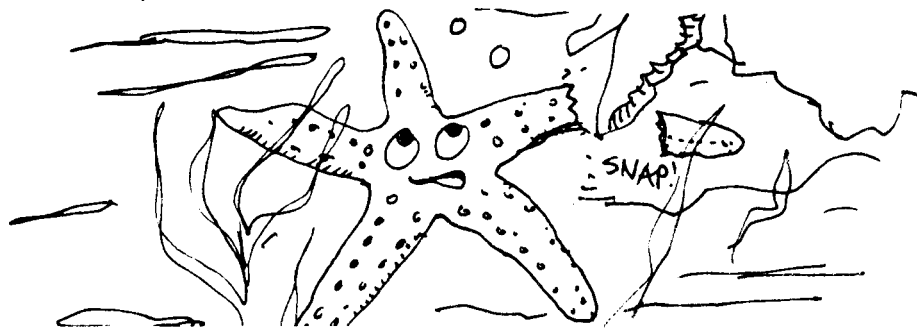
The illegal coral trade, along with destructive dynamite fishing, pollution, siltation, and other factors, has contributed to the degradation of close to 75% of Philippine coral reefs.

What You Can Do

The coral is most beautiful in its natural habitat and the underwater marine environment, specially a reef, is the best aquarium an individual can see. Let us contribute to its conservation by following these measures:

- i) restrain from buying any reef-building or stony corals;
- ii) avoid the gathering of any live corals for "pasalubong";
- iii) make sure that the coral jewelry or item you buy was not derived from stony corals;
- iv) buy only jewelry or products made of precious and semi-precious corals; and if you're not sure that what you're buying is made of precious and semi-precious corals, DON'T BUY.

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Oops! No problem, but unlike me, corals can't regenerate. I hope humans realize that. Once destroyed, they can kiss it goodbye!