



A bitter harvest

Coral 'export' crisis

Kathleen Donaghey
 Environment

CORAL harvesters are stripping the rarest most colourful live species from the Great Barrier Reef in a controversial trade sanctioned by governments.

Hammers and chisels are used to prise off 100 tonnes of live and ornamental species a year from the World Heritage-listed natural wonder, annual Coral Fishery status reports show.

Demand is driven by private aquariums in the US, Europe and the Middle East where sale of the rarest Aussie corals has spurred the plunder Down Under.

Calls are mounting for a ban on wild harvesting, with warnings whole reefs are being ransacked of entire species.

The Queensland Government actually sets a quota of 200 tonnes annually (shared between 59 licences) of specialty coral, live rock, coral rubble and ornamental coral. This is the highest in the country, compared to 7.5 tonnes in Western Australia.

This is despite wild harvesting being banned in several countries including the Philippines, Bali, Guam, Samoa, Puerto Rico, Hawaii and the US state of Florida due to depletion.

Most are chipped off reefs near Cairns and the Keppel

Islands in central Queensland but also near Bundaberg and whole corals with hundreds of bright polyps intact can fetch thousands of dollars in the US, with individual polyps worth up to \$300 each.

Outraged ecologists, tourist operators, divers and indigenous landowners say whole reefs have been depleted of rare, vulnerable and endangered species.

Keppel Islands local Lyndie Malan, who runs an eco-tourism business, said people chiselled corals right in front of tourists who were snorkeling and diving.

"Day after day after day they're taking everything," said Ms Malan.

"They're just destroying the place, just destroying it."

Exportation of live coral was legalised in 2006, when "roaming licences" were also introduced.

Coral ecologist Alison Jones, from the University of Central Queensland, warned in her latest paper, *Raiding the Coral Nurseries*, which was published in this month's *Diversity* publication that reefs already were experiencing localised extinction of species though harvesting.

"Our World Heritage status is on the line. The State Government is treating the Great Barrier Reef like an industrial development site," Dr Jones said.

GREAT BARRIER GRIEF

WHAT'S COLLECTED:

- Live corals (including anemones, soft and hard corals)
- Ornamental (non-living) corals
- Living rock (dead coral skeletons with algae and other living organisms)
- Coral rubble (coarsely broken up coral fragments)
- Coral sand (finely ground particles of coral skeleton - but only as incidental catch)
- Coral taxa from over 36 families is harvested for live aquarium trade

THE AMOUNT COLLECTED:

- 2008-09 157,764 (28,981kg)
- 2007-08 128,882 (33,461kg)
- 2006-07 75,740 (26,157kg)

THE RULES:

- Coral may only be taken by hand or by using hand-held non-mechanical implements such as hammer and chisel
- Licence holders may use underwater breathing apparatus (scuba or hookah)
- Recreational harvesters are not allowed to use scuba or hookah gear

Source: Annual Status Report Coral Fishery 2009

