Chapter 39

CITES, corals and customs: The international trade in wild coral

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Abstract

The international trade in live Scleractinian corals as ‘marine ornamentals’ is a global industry responsible for the movement of huge numbers of animals every year. An analysis of the CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) trade database shows well over a million colonies traded in 2005, the year for which there is most recent data. The major importers are the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) accounting for 65 % and 24 % of the total annual imports of hard corals respectively. The biggest exporter by far is Indonesia, which accounted for 91 % of exports made in 2005.

Legislative mechanisms such as CITES and the EU Wildlife Trade Regulations provide a framework for monitoring and regulating the trade, but despite these restrictions substantial numbers of corals (all listed on CITES Appendix II) are still imported illegally every year. Customs teams work at national borders to prevent such shipments and with support from public aquariums can have an impact on the illegal trade. A partnership in the United Kingdom (UK) between HM (Her Majesty’s) Customs and the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) has seized and re-housed 1000 colonies of hard coral brought into the UK illegally between 2003 and 2007 and contributes to the enforcement of CITES regulations on the ground. Public aquariums have a valuable role to play in supporting CITES legislation and in educating the general public about the need for sustainability in the marine ornamental trade.