

In total, less than  
half the coastline  
of Rarotonga

is used for regular aquarium fish collecting.

- There is no collection inside the lagoon.
- Areas frequented by rough weather conditions are seldom fished
- The five marine reserves (*Ra'ui*) areas are no-fishing zones
- Specific areas, set aside for tour dive operators, are not fished.

All these areas serve as natural harvest controls and help maintain breeding populations to supply new recruits (larval and adult) to replenish adjacent reef habitats.

Currently only one exporter is operating on Rarotonga and it is considered that if there were an increase in aquarium fish fisheries, further restrictions and management would need to be imposed.

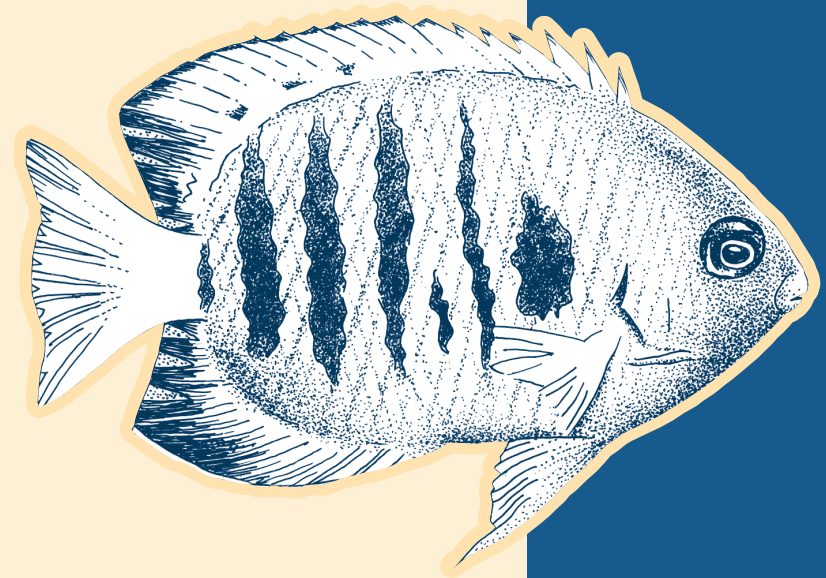
The aquarium fish industry could expand to the other southern islands. However, its economic viability would need to be assessed.

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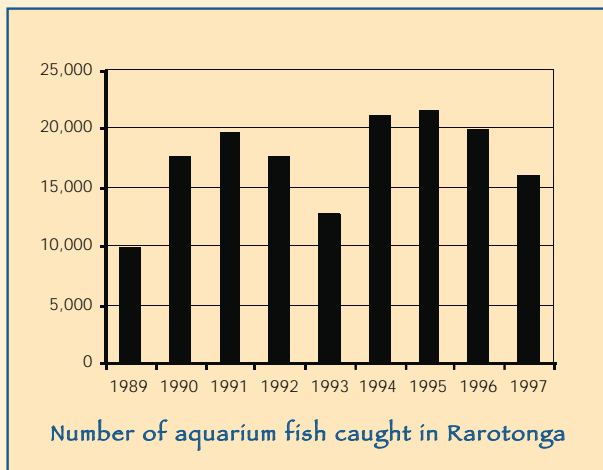
# Aquarium Fish Collection In the Cook Islands 2000



The commercial exploitation of aquarium fish

in Rarotonga began in the late 1980s. Although the operation is relatively small, it is an important export commodity, averaging approximately 3% of the total value of the country's exports. Currently the operation employs up to ten staff.

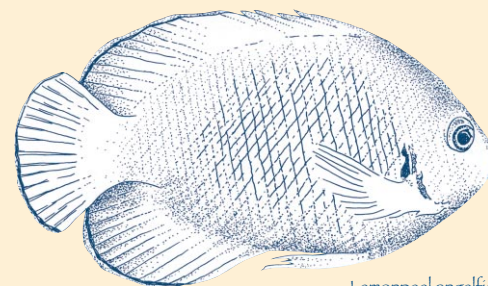
A total of 35 species of marine aquarium fish are collected by divers using SCUBA and either a small-meshed barrier or a hand-held scoop net. Only five of these species are in regular demand. The majority of aquarium fish are caught on the reef slope between depths ranging from 8 to 35 metres, with occasional specimens taken at depths in excess of 50 metres. The fish are generally caught one at a time.



Target species

Typically aquarium fish are small, brightly coloured, have limited forage areas, and are largely ignored in traditional food fishing. They are short lived and reach reproductive maturity at an early age. All these factors make them suitable for the aquarium trade.

At this stage, the five main fish taken from the Cook Islands are the Flame angel (35%) (see cover image), Red hawkfish (30%), *Ventrallis* (15%), Scotts wrasse (7%) and Lemonpeel angelfish (7%).



Lemonpeel angelfish

The use of damaging fish-collection techniques such as sodium cyanide, quinaldine, rotenone (all of which are fish anaesthetics) are not practiced by the Cook Islands aquarium fish collectors. The capture of Red hawkfishes may require selected branches of the coral colony to be removed. These branches can however be re-planted.