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Fishing Softly on Coral Reefs

by John Eberlee

"You place a puck-sized lump of cyanide in the bottom of a squeeze bottle. You fill it with water and spray the contents on a coral reef. Then you scoop up the gasping fish as they come rushing out of their holes."

Today, this is how most tropical fish begin the journey to home aquariums throughout the world, says Don McAllister, president of Ocean Voice International, an Ottawa-based conservation group. For years, sodium cyanide has played a key role in supplying the multibillion dollar global market for ornamental fish. Unfortunately, in the Philippines -- home to 70% of the world's ornamental fish -- widespread use of illegal cyanide kills thousands of tonnes of commercial fish and shellfish every year. Repeated doses are also destroying the coral reefs on which marine life depend for shelter. These coral reefs are important to Filipinos: healthy reefs attract tourists, protect coastal communities from coastal waves, and supply more than half the population's protein requirements.

ALTERNATIVE TECHNIQUE

To end the needless slaughter, Ocean Voice International has joined forces with the Haribon Foundation for the Conservation of Natural Resources in Manila to promote an alternative fish capturing technique. Developed by Dr McAllister and his colleagues, the technique is simple, highly effective, yet non-destructive. Using an ordinary bamboo stick, divers chase fish out of their holes into a transparent net, then catch them with smaller dip nets. With financial support from IDRC, the partners have developed a two-week course for Filipino fishermen taught by former "cyaniders." For cyanide users, switching to nets is a logical move, says Dr McAllister. Trained collectors catch just as many fish and their expenses are significantly lower. A year's supply of cyanide costs around \$400, compared to a mere \$25 per net. Kicking the cyanide habit is also healthy. Some people have been killed and many more have suffered debilitating illness from inhaling cyanide fumes.

So far, the program has reached 500 of an estimated 2500 fish collectors in the Philippines. In communities that have received training, cyanide use has decreased by roughly 80%. "Not everyone is sticking with the nets, but even those who return to cyanide are using it less," says Dr McAllister.

To round out the program, the Haribon Foundation hopes to set up community cooperatives that will market fish on behalf of local collectors. "Right now, some collectors are under the control of the aquarium industry. The people selling cyanide are often buying the fish too," Dr McAllister explains.

Haribon also encourages villagers to get directly involved in coral reef management. The group is introducing concepts such as no-fishing zones on damaged reefs. Studies show that if left alone, reefs eventually regenerate and the overall catch increases dramatically. "When a reef is half dead, the reproductive success of the fish is very low. But if the young fishes are allowed to grow up and lay eggs,

their young will hatch. Since most underwater animals produce more young than the habitat can support, the surplus fish will move out into neighbouring reefs and restock them," says Dr McAllister.

According to Dr McAllister, these initiatives will benefit not only collectors in the Philippines but dealers in North America. As coral reefs are restored and cyanide use decreases, the health of captured fish should improve noticeably. At present almost half the fish die en route from the reef to the hobbyist.

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