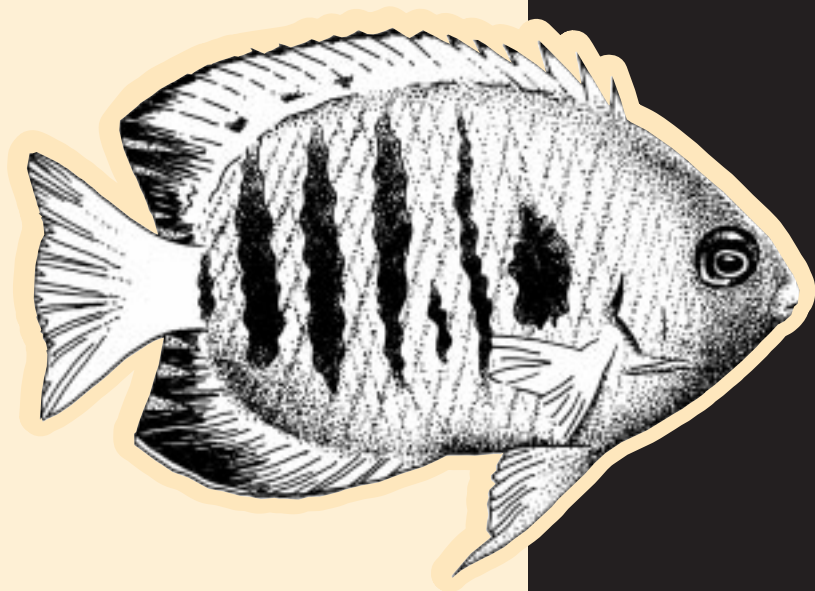


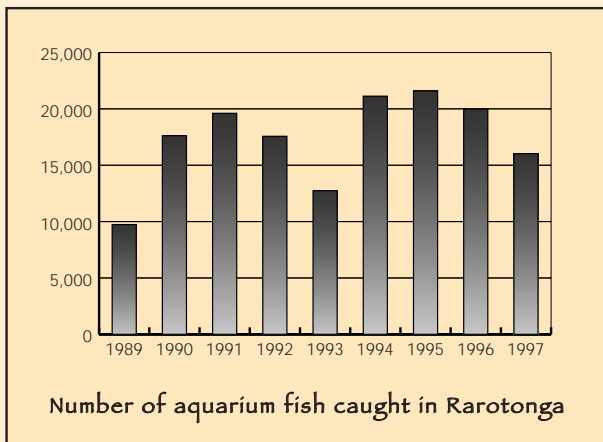
Aquarium Fish Collection  
in the Cook Islands  
2000



## Aquarium fish collection

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 three per cent of the total value of the country's exports. Currently the operation employs up to ten people.

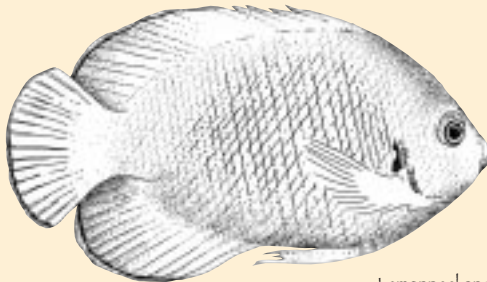
A total of 35 species of marine aquarium fish are collected by divers using SCUBA and either a small-meshed barrier net or a hand-held scoop net. Only five species are in regular demand. The majority of aquarium fish are caught on the reef slope in depths ranging from 8 to 35 metres, with occasional 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%), ventralis (15%), Scotts' wrasse (7%) and lemonpeel angelfish (7%).



Lemonpeel angelfish

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



## Area restrictions

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; and
- Specific areas, set aside for tour dive operators, are not fished.

All these areas help to maintain breeding populations of fish and serve 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 a marked increase in aquarium fish collecting activities, further restrictions and management would need to be imposed.

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

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