

The Marine Aquarium Council, certifying quality and sustainability in the marine aquarium industry

by Paul Holthus

Why was the Marine Aquarium Council established?

Market forces are the most useful means to encourage and support quality 'products' and sustainable practices in the marine ornamentals industry. The demand from informed consumers for such products and practices creates an incentive for industry to adopt and adhere to standards for quality and for the management of the organisms, habitat, and industry practices—and thereby to provide quality-assured, higher-value marine organisms.

The corollary is that marine aquarium organisms of poor quality and/or resulting from unsustainable practices will be less acceptable to the market. In turn, destructive and substandard practices (e.g. use of sodium cyanide, lack of water quality control, high levels of mortality) will decrease as these operators either improve their practices to comply with the standards, or lose the support of the market.

To allow these market forces to work, a certification system is needed to:

- Establish standards for quality products and practices;
- Provide a mechanism to certify compliance with these standards;
- Label the results of certification for quality assurance; and
- Create consumer demand and confidence for certified and labelled organisms, practices and industry participants.

Because the trade in marine ornamentals is worldwide, an international institution which is independent, and which involves all relevant stakeholders, is required to develop and control such a certification system. In particular, it is essential to work with the entire 'Chain of Custody' of the industry—i.e. from collectors to exporters to importers/wholesalers to retailers and the consumer. The Marine Aquarium Council (MAC) has been established for this purpose.

The Marine Aquarium Council offers those with a stake in the future of marine aquarium organisms, habitat and the industry the opportunity to:

- Participate in developing and implementing standards for quality, and a certification and labelling system;
- Exercise greater control and management over the organisms and habitat upon which the industry is based;
- Provide a quality-controlled, value-added product to the consumer;
- Benefit from a programme to create consumer demand for organisms supplied through MAC-certified practices; and
- Be a part of a forum for the industry and its partners to address the opportunities and future of a quality-based, sustainable industry.

Background and mission of the Marine Aquarium Council

The Marine Aquarium Council (MAC) is a non-profit organisation composed of representatives of the aquarium industry, hobbyists, conservation organisations, government agencies, and public aquariums - all with a shared interest in the future of the marine aquarium industry, the marine organisms it is based on, and the habitat that supports them. Participation in the Marine Aquarium Council continues to be open to those ready to collaborate and contribute to a constructive dialogue and the development of a certification system to achieve the goals of MAC.

The foundations for MAC (initially called the Marine Aquarium Fish Council) emerged from the meetings of a cross section of these stakeholders and their common aims of:

- Addressing concerns about the effects of destructive fishing and poor handling practices on coral reef fish and habitat;
- Developing a market for marine aquarium organisms which are supplied through certified sustainable practices based on consumer demand and where organisms which are certified have a higher value;
- Maintaining livelihoods and income-earning ability of rural fishermen by ensuring the marine

aquarium fishery, and hence industry, is sustainable; and

- Increasing marine conservation awareness and action within the industry and among marine aquarium hobbyists and the general public.

The goal of MAC is to ensure a sustainable future for the marine aquarium industry, organisms and habitat through market incentives that encourage and support high quality and sustainable practices.

MAC will accomplish this by establishing standards for 'best practices', developing an independent system to certify compliance with these standards, and creating consumer demand and confidence for MAC certified organisms, practices and industry participants.

From the broad coalition—or network—that constitutes MAC, an Interim Board was created to provide for more consistent, focused action toward realising the MAC goals. The Interim Board is currently composed of representatives of: American Marinelife Dealers Association, American Zoo and Aquarium Association, International Marinelife Alliance—Philippines, Ornamental Aquatic Trade Association, Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council, Philippine Tropical Fish Exporters Association, Quality Marine Inc., The Nature Conservancy, and World Wildlife Fund. The Interim Board formed a series of technical committees to begin work on issues such as standards, monitoring, and education; hired an Executive Director as of June 1 1998; and has incorporated MAC as a non-profit organisation.

The importance of what MAC is working to achieve, its innovative basis in market mechanisms, and the broad base of participation has led to the active interest and initial support of several funding organisations for the initial development of the certification system in pilot areas. In Hawaii, an initial prototype set of collecting and handling guidelines has been developed through a series of multi-stakeholder workshops. Similar efforts are underway in the Philippines and soon will begin in a South Pacific pilot area. MAC will continue a phased process of multi-stakeholder consultations to finalise the initial standards, test them in collection-to-retailer operations in pilot areas, and launch the certification/labelling system in 1999.

It is envisaged that the MAC organisation and process, when fully established and mature, will evolve into a largely self-financed system based on the improved economic return from certified marine aquarium organisms. In the meantime, external funds continue to be sought for the initial stages of establishing MAC—e.g. to support the development and testing of the certification sys-

tem, to train fishermen in sustainable collecting and handling methods, and to conduct awareness raising among the consumers and industry.

How to 'join' the Marine Aquarium Council

MAC is a global network of those interested in ensuring a sustainable future for the marine aquarium industry—and the organisms and habitat it is based on—through a certification system that encourages and supports quality products and sustainable practices.

Organisations, companies, associations, government agencies, other groups, and individuals who are ready to collaborate and contribute constructively to achieving the goals of MAC are invited to join the MAC Network by completing and submitting the form on the MAC Website.

<http://www.aquariumcouncil.org>

General MAC information bulletins and updates will be posted at the MAC Update Bulletin location of the Website. More specific 'mailings' will be made to Network Working Groups through fax and e-mail List Serves. The List Serves will initially be used to develop and consolidate geographic MAC Working Groups, especially in source areas (e.g. Philippines, Hawaii). As MAC efforts progress, calls for participation in cross-cutting Technical Working Groups on specific topics (e.g. water quality standards) will be made and List Serves developed for these groups.

Where to contact the Marine Aquarium Council

MAC welcomes your comments, input and, especially, your involvement. For more information (and if you do not have access to the MAC Website) contact:

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