

"The Dark Hobby": The Price Paid to Tank Pretty Fishes

By [Marc Bekoff, Psychology Today/Animal Emotions](#)

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An interview with Robert Wintner about the damage of the Hawaii aquarium trade.

"The Hawaii aquarium trade has been catching reef wildlife for U.S. and global hobby tanks for decades with no catch limits, no limit on the number of catchers, and no constraints on rare, endemic or vanishing species. Reef advocates report that fish populations and biodiversity have decreased drastically, affecting the hierarchy of marine wildlife, and believe removing fish from their natural habitat should be forbidden."

I recently watched a forthcoming film called [The Dark Hobby: All The Pretty Fishes and the Price Paid to Tank Them](#) and was caught completely unaware of the ways in which the Hawaii aquarium trade is devastating rare, endemic, or vanishing species and coral reefs. For example, 99% of the fishes die within a year of capture and demand replacement. Cyanide and dynamite are used to capture fishes in the Philippines and Indonesia, most of whom die as a result of these treatments. The trailer can be seen [here](#).

I immediately wanted to know more about this landmark film and what was happening to these [incredible sentient beings](#) and their homes, and was pleased that Executive Producer Robert Wintner could take the time to answer a few questions. Our interview went as follows.

Why did you make *The Dark Hobby*?

The Dark Hobby resulted from filmmaker and Producer/Director Paula Fouce of Paradise Filmworks snorkeling Kona in world-class equipment from Snorkel Bob's. Returning her gear, she said, "I don't get it. Where are the fish?" We talked. Paradise Filmworks makes great movies, and timing felt right. After campaigning ten years in the Hawaii legislature, we passed Senate Bill 1240 in 2017 to end the aquarium trade. The governor is not a water guy, knows nothing of ocean habitat or species, and defers to his Department of Land & Natural Resources (DLNR) where the director came from The Nature Conservancy (TNC), a Trojan horse NGO working to consolidate political power and "conservation" funding. TNC serves Big Fishing; all of its "marine reserves" still allow mass extraction, because that extraction is "sustainable." TNC has never defined "sustainability," and facilitates acceptable levels of destruction to sustain bottom-line revenue. TNC/DLNR persuaded the weak governor to veto SB 1240.

Hawaii, the Philippines, and Indonesia are major hubs of reef wildlife trafficking for the pet trade. SB 1240 signed into law would diminish the supply side, and the vast majority of Hawaii people wanting the aquarium trade ended. But it was a sad day in Mudville. So we shifted to a demand-side approach, to discourage and marginalize aquarium home hobbyists, many of whom think these critters are captive-bred. *The Dark Hobby* shows the source and consequence of the aquarium hobby. No tank inmate returns to the wild, except for sewage-system survivors or those released as invasive species far from home.

How does it follow up on your previous work and interests?

The Dark Hobby is a natural extension of marine photography, showing habitat and species most people never see. The aquarium trade gets away with murder by being underwater/under the radar. Revealing the [crime](#) helps clarify the situation. Going from supply side to demand side also seemed logical, as the campaign gained depth. With friends and familiar neighborhoods down there, it's only natural to defend from marauders with malicious intent. The mainland aquarium trade is represented by a few apologists with advanced degrees, while Hawaii collectors are low on the trade totem, diving for chump change, compensating with massive volume, tearing up reefs to capture wildlife. The photos and videos don't lie, and the current Hawaii governor backs this corrupt commercial extraction. With the SB 1240 veto, the Governor's office said: "Hawaii will have an aquarium trade the world will [envy](#)."

That was a line in the sand. Most people hate what they see but feel helpless. *The Dark Hobby* shows how people might stand up, step up, and speak up. The ranks are growing.



Source: Robert Wintner, with permissions

What are some of your major themes and messages?

The Snorkel Bob dive team shot the reef video and photo material in *The Dark Hobby* in Hawaii, the Philippines, Indonesia, U.S. Virgins, Cuba, Palau, Tahiti, and Fiji. While some people require ghastly scenes for personal [motivation](#), we focused on reef beauty and the treasures at risk, on what remains to be saved. Ocean warming and the aberrations now prevalent, like acidification, plastic pollution, crown-of-thorns starfish, make reef health all the more precarious.

Herbivores account for 70-80% of the aquarium catch, with 27-29 million reef critters in the aquarium supply line at all times. 99% of those critters die within a year of capture and demand replacement. That's what feeds the bottom line—what the aquarium trade and The Nature Conservancy call "sustainable." Herbivores graze algae dawn to dusk. Algae is the biggest threat of warming.

Beyond common sense rationale, *The Dark Hobby* gives voice to fish as personalities with evolved social networks and emotions, as friends of each other and of marine mammals who may visit. As Dr. Jonathan Balcombe points out in *The Dark Hobby*, putting a fish in a tank takes away his most prized possession: his freedom.



Source: Robert Wintner, with permissions

How does your film differ from others on the same or similar topics?

The Dark Hobby may be similar to other ocean-based movies in its appeal: that viewers open their eyes and hearts to what's happening and to help make change. Calling out an office with an aquarium is a start. Either the business will respond, or patronage can go elsewhere. The same holds for bistros, restaurants, lobbies, waiting rooms—all the dire, dark places that doom fish to brief, miserable lives of containment under fluorescent lights, once abducted from the home reef. *The Dark Hobby* may differ from other ocean-based movies in form, color, movement, and grace, filmed on reefs around the world renowned for spectacular beauty to show how reefs might recover to greatness with protection from commercial extraction. Big Fishing is ravenous and mostly unchecked.

Who is your intended audience?

The Dark Hobby is aimed at the whole wide world, 70% of which is saltwater. The average aquarium home hobbyist is a 50-something female, who may not change. But *The Dark Hobby* may open the eyes, minds, and hearts of those aquarium hobbyists who will take down those aquariums. Another key objective is to correct the vague notion that somebody, somewhere is growing those fish. 2% of all aquarium inmates are captive-bred. 98% are taken from the wild.

Are you hopeful things will change in the ways in which humans perceive and interact with fishes? I know most people have no idea where their pet fishes come from.

I'm hopeful that humanity will improve if it can curb its propagation rate. Sneak preview response to *The Dark Hobby* was overwhelming, and test showings included Midwest viewers. Will they eat less seafood after seeing the movie? We can only speculate, but they may pause on recollection of a scene, in which fish engage the camera and emote. Momentary pause may be the first step of the long journey home.

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What are some of your current projects?

I'm wrapping up my 13th novel, *Solomon Kursh*, in which a young man of the Sixties goes to [LSD](#) and cosmic seed, forsaking a conventional future to join a cult. He cannot disavow his natural [intelligence](#), however, and so he rises to operational [management](#), where difficult truths go against the blissful flow. In the mix: three layers of love, ghastly clues from the past, and moral dilemma.



Source: Robert Wintner, with permissions

Is there anything else you would like to tell readers?

The Dark Hobby sheds light on wildlife trafficking kept below the surface far too long and demonstrates the rich reef culture that is ours to cherish or to lose. *The Dark Hobby* should end on the Hawaii Supreme Court granting injunctive relief to reef habitat and species. No new permits, and all old permits null and void and stopping this devastating extraction pending environmental review. Hawaii DLNR, as managed by The Nature Conservancy Director Suzanne Case, trumped the Supreme Court with a ruling of her own: no permit required for commercial aquarium collection. “It’s sustainable,” she ruled. Collectors in Hawaii never stopped, with protection from Hawaii DLNR. Case was appointed by the governor, and so was the attorney general.

The Hawaii Supreme Court ruling to end the aquarium trade took six years on two appeals and was integral to the overall campaign that included legislative, judiciary, and executive. (In three meetings with David Ige, Governor, he nodded off three times, murmuring “no” and asking no questions.)

Late in 2019, Hawaii DLNR presented that court-mandated environmental review, as prepared by the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council (PIJAC), a D.C. lobbying group for the commercial pet trade. PIJAC lobbied Congress on puppy mills recently, because a ban on puppy mills would hurt pet shop retailers. PIJAC muddies Hawaii water as well with “an economic hardship for aquarium collectors.” This Environmental Review is not relevant, not environmental, not accurate, and not legal.

The End. Except that no campaign to save nature from greed will end. In that light, please enjoy the show. Anyone working in conservation knows the greatest challenge is morale. [Spiritual](#) fatigue displaces spiritual vigor, as the bad guys wage their wicked ways and we feel that we have nothing to show for so much effort and expense. In that light, please consider this and any campaign as a contact sport, a lively, rowdy scrum that won’t end because human greed won’t end. We all check out bye ’n bye, ideally with a bang, not a whimper, as we [rage](#), rage at the dying of the light. What happens next? You happen next. For more information please click [here](#),