

The Live Reef Food Fish Trade (LRFFT) is an industry worth nearly a billion dollars annually and in need of urgent reform. At stake are the Coral Triangle's reefs, the fish they sustain and the well-being of thousands of fishing communities.



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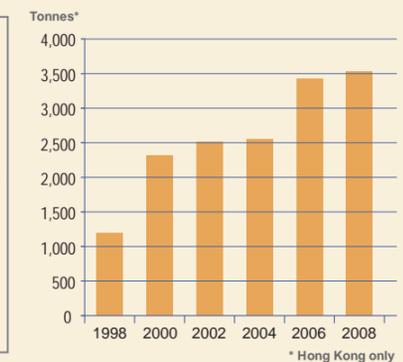
Fishing down the food chain

As much as 50 percent of reef fish are being taken from the water for trade before they have had an opportunity to reproduce. These fish are 'grown out' in cages until they reach market size, a practice that will be disastrous in the long term. Caged fish don't contribute to replenishing wild stocks and high rates of extraction of live fish are already resulting in fishing down the food chain, with unknown long-term ecosystem impacts.

Feeding a growing appetite for reef fish



Growing imports, boon to bust?



International trade in live reef food fish began in the mid-1970s in countries close to Hong Kong, such as the Philippines. Since then, it has expanded throughout Southeast Asia and into the Indo-west Pacific in search of new sources of reef fish, leaving those closer to the markets depleted.

More and more high value live fish are being taken out of the water to fuel the LRFFT. As the trade expands across and beyond the Coral Triangle, it is depleting fish essential to the natural function of reefs and leaving communities facing an uncertain future.

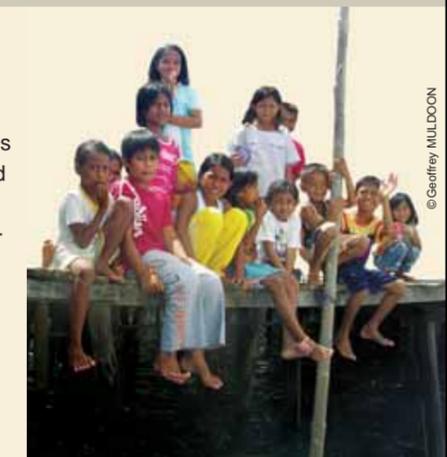
The leopard coral grouper (*Plectropomus leopardus*) is the most heavily traded and one of the highest priced species in the LRFFT. According to the IUCN Red List, landings of this species are declining in some countries, implying that populations may be decreasing. Due to this trend, the fish may be classified as Near Threatened.



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The hidden cost of reef fish trade

The LRFFT is hardly good news for fishing communities either. Severely depleted fish stocks threaten local food security and undermine local incomes in the long term. The heart of the problem is that the LRFFT is a 'boom-and-bust' business. Although the trade has provided communities with additional income, these benefits are unsustainable and have often come at considerable cost—ecologically, economically, and socially.



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Cyanide, which is used to stun fish in order to catch them more easily, is highly damaging to fragile coral reefs. Smaller non-target species are also affected by this poisonous substance. ▼



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THE CORAL TRIANGLE — the nursery of the seas — is the most diverse marine region on the planet, covering 6 million km² of ocean across six countries in the Indo-Pacific region. It is home to 3000 species of reef fish and commercially-valuable species such as tuna, whales, dolphins, rays, sharks, and six of the seven known species of marine turtles.

What is the LRFFT?

The LRFFT involves the capture of reef fish which are kept alive for sale and consumption mainly in Hong Kong and mainland China. Smaller markets exist in Malaysia and Singapore.

Live fish have long been traded around Southeast Asia as a luxury food item but in recent decades, trade in fish captured on coral reefs has expanded rapidly.

The LRFFT includes a wide variety of fish, with several kinds of groupers now dominating the market. Because of their superior

taste and texture, groupers have now become some of the most valued fish in this sector. Groupers are typically carnivores, predators at the top of the reef food chain that are:

- Rare relative to the animals at lower levels of the food chain, on which they feed
- Long-lived, up to several decades
- Often late to mature and reproduce

This makes them particularly vulnerable to fishing.

Exporting reef life

The main exporting countries in the LRFFT are the Philippines, Indonesia, Australia, Malaysia, Taiwan, Thailand, the People's Republic of China, Vietnam, and the Maldives. ▼



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