



De Jong Marinelife was my last client while working for the Marine Aquarium Council (MAC)¹. To my knowledge it was also the last company getting MAC Certified in Europe. In the meantime MAC lost its funding and phased out its activities and programs. Remaining is a paper tiger, but nevertheless popularity is rising in Europe only now. Why that is, I wanted to learn from Arie De Jong, owner of De Jong Marinelife. MAC Certification of his company ends in 2012.

MAC as US NGO had always difficulties to be recognised in Europe. When I got hired, my first task was to help change that and increase the organisation's popularity. I got in contact with importers and wholesalers in Germany, France, Italy and the Netherlands to help them prepare for Certification. Arie contacted me as more and more of his clients requested MAC Certification and were asking for MAC Certified products. In the same time campaigns and public awareness on issues related to marine ornamental collection such as cyanide use were on the rise. Then the aquarium hobby got under pressure too, when NGOs were picking on animal welfare as triggered by Disney's „Finding Nemo“. Sustainability became a topic, also in the marine aquarium trade.

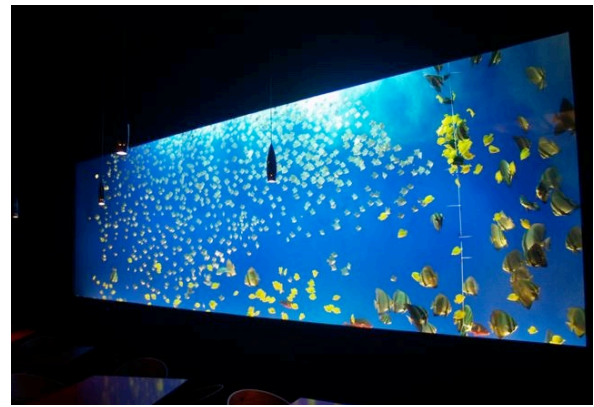
After MAC's decline Arie De Jong was one of the first who were open to set up a new organisation to follow up on MAC's tasks. The idea for the Sustainable Aquarium Industry Association (SAIA)² was born. Arie provided us some space at his INTERZOO 2008 booth to establish first contacts and explore perception of the industry. However, just before the official inaugural meeting, Arie told us preferring to calm down his involvement for the benefit of his membership in OFI³ and MAC. We could only accept his decision, but were wondering why he changed his mind.

Trigger to travel into Dutch Gelderland, was a picture taken at a Suisse trade show for watches. Watches manufacturer BREITLING installed a gigantic aquarium for decoration purposes, with thousand of yellow tangs on display. An eye-catcher, by all means. However, humane treatment and animal welfare is something else. De Jong Marinelife was named as supplier of the livestock and I wanted to get his opinion on such use of wildlife.

¹ **Marine Aquarium Council (MAC)** – US NGO dedicated to ,transform the Marine aquarium trade'

² **Sustainable Aquarium Industry Association (SAIA)** – European network for an Ethical and Sustainable marine aquarium trade & hobby

³ **Ornamental Fish International (OFI)** – Internationale trade organisation for the freshwater and marine aquarium trade



Schmidt: *How did you get in contact with BREITLING?*

De Jong: *The Oceanographic Museum asked if I could supply fishes for the display.*

Schmidt: *It doesn't look appropriate to the species needs on the photographs. May I ask for mortality rates during display?*

De Jong: *Around 1 % are lost during importing/shipping/display and return to my facility. Yellow tang are rather reef associated open water swimmers, who therefore rather need live rocks for algae feeding only. Thus a one-week display in a decoration less tank is fine. The tank has some small rocks and fish are provided with Nori algae for natural feeding. Fish, I'm importing from Asia or the South Pacific often face more stresses and strains. I test water quality and ensure it's right upon introduction of the fish to the tank. Quality control and maintenance is in hand of the best aquarist in Europe and a vet, specialized in fish, is present daily to ensure a suitable and stable environment.*

Schmidt: *I understood you do not sell, but rent out the fish. Is this a new trend – renting livestock for display?*

De Jong: *No, not at all. BREITLING is the only customer demanding this. The idea was only realized, because we could provide a safe environment for the animals on display.*

BREITLING' motivation is to separate from the usual displays at the show. Oversize LCD monitors are quite usual; a life display is rather the exception. A nice marketing concept, however, of questionable moral. Is it ethical to use wildlife for display? One can spot aquaria at the doctor's office, hotel lobbies, airports, etc. Many marine aquarists oppose such animal keeping, as focus is on display and not on the creature. Often maintenance companies take care from set up, stocking to daily routines like cleaning and feeding. No interaction of the owner is involved.

I'm still puzzled that a well-known public aquarium, dedicated to research and education shall have interacted as broker here. I tried to investigate, but haven't received any helpful reply from the staff in charge in Monaco.

Schmidt: *As we touched the topic slightly already: How about ethics in a wildlife trade?*

De Jong: *Not an easy question. I'm sure transshipping and online trading is not something we should promote, but is a tendency and hard to neglect. The change stems from changes in the demand of the consumers.*

Schmidt: *I thought you also offer transshipping and supply online-retailers as well?*

De Jong: *Right, but only in small scale and mainly to compete. In my opinion such business should be regulated when it comes to live animals and legislation should provide guidelines regarding quarantine and rest periods. My main revenues originate from quite different sources.*

Schmidt: *As I know, you work a lot with public aquaria and zoos. Can you explain more?*

De Jong: De Jong Marinelife built a holding system suitable for animals of unusual sizes like sharks, rays and groupers dedicated to display at public aquarium. These holding tanks are round and have a high water through flow (important for most elasmobranchs). Approximately 1 Million litres of saltwater circulate in our systems. Besides providing a species appropriate stocking system, we also offer specialized transport facilities. Our tank truck is currently on the road for two weeks to Georgia. Two of our staff accompanies the transport and watch water quality and conditions of the organisms carefully until they reach their new home. Only very few companies can offer similar service to zoos and public aquaria or other huge aquarium systems. More details can be found on our website⁴.



Dedicated holding tanks for sharks and rays (left)



Shark tanks - Detail

Schmidt: Do you advise curators on stocking and suitable species?

De Jong: Yes, I do, but most of the time they decide by themselves and do not like too much interference.

Schmidt: What when fish outgrow even large tanks? That's still something happening in show aquaria as well.

De Jong: I can offer my help there too. Any aquarium can offer organisms via my stock list and I'll accommodate transport once a new home is found for the organism.

I tell Arie about a recent request I received from an aquarist, where a moray eel was getting a too big appetite on his tank mates over time and needed to be removed...

De Jong: Yes, this happens, although careful planning could prevent it.

Schmidt: What about retailers, who just sell anything what is demanded?

De Jong: I cannot really comment on that issue, because I'm not selling to private persons. However, I guess most retailers advise as best as they can, so that their customers return and their business succeeds in the long term.

Schmidt: How did De Jong Marinelife start?

De Jong: My parents opened a small pet shop named "Scalare" in 1958. They were the first in the Netherlands to offer marine organisms. As a child I couldn't ignore the fascination of the underwater world and started to learn the business from the scratch, growing up in the shop. In the beginning 1980s name and activities of the business changed. We also moved to enlarge the facility to what it is now – rather unique in Europe. De Jong Marinelife operates worldwide and is supplier of many zoos and aquaria.

⁴ www.dejongmarinelife.nl



Acclimatisation



Acclimatisation: separation into compartments

Schmidt: What sustains your success?

De Jong: I think the most valuable asset in this profession is knowledge and experience. Nowadays everybody thinks he/she can open a pet shop. Therefore many retailers close down again after one, two years. It's mainly the animals that fall by the wayside. Changes in Dutch legislation 15 years ago enable anybody, if experienced or not, to open a marine aquarium business. There are no requirements. My company has always built on know-how.

Schmidt: What are your bestsellers? Can you name the top 5 selling fish species?

De Jong: Ocellaris, other Amphiprion spp., Chromis viridis, Gramma loreto, Ptersynchiropus splendidus, Pseudochromis are the big sellers since years. Probably 50% of these bestsellers are tank bred.

Schmidt: What is the ratio of bred/cultured species?

De Jong: I would guess around 30% in fish and 90% in corals.

Schmidt: That's more than I expected. Where do these fish come from?

De Jong: Mainly from Indonesia, Israel and USA. Indonesia produces the Indo-Pacific species, Israel the Pseudochromis spp. and USA the rest.

Schmidt: Do you purchase from European breeders as well?

De Jong: Only exceptionally. I rather sustain business in the original supply countries.



Holding Facility



Quarantine tank

Schmidt: Do you support any special projects there?

De Jong: I support my business partners by purchasing big volumes, but also expect to be served first and benefit from reduced transport times and thus better quality. I don't invest financially in projects in supply countries anymore. However, sometimes I help by investing in their farms in advance and get paid back in fish.

Well, conducting projects in countries like Indonesia or the Philippines is not a piece of cake. One needs a long breath and a reliable partner and those are not easy to find. Many went bankrupt overnight...if private businesses or NGOs.

Schmidt: You are a member of OFI, an organisation, mainly in the freshwater sector. Why not join SAIA?

De Jong: Simply because OFI is protecting this business and fights trade restrictions in our profession. That's quite unique. Frankly, I'm not convinced of the usefulness of NGOs or similar organisations. MAC Certification didn't improve quality. It was just a lot of noise and a lot of confusion among hobbyists. Top quality fish suppliers is what we need. Most of them have their own collectors, working with nets.⁵

Schmidt: MAC is inactive since 2009. Why do you still display your Certificate?

De Jong: I was always supportive of the goals and still am. Moreover public aquaria recognize you as better company when displaying the MAC label.

Schmidt: That's it?

De Jong: It's a delicate topic. Since years the marine aquarium trade is in focus of negative campaigns. Although the seafood industry has a by far bigger impact on the environment, it's rather the small industries like us that are criticised for being inhumane and unsustainable. I understand that ethics are becoming more and more important, but let's not get carried away when looking at the marine aquarium trade in this respect.



⁵ **Note:** MAC-Certification is an ecolabel. Therefore designating sustainability of a product only, not quality. As such the MAC standards included requirements for sustainability and reduced environmental impact, but didn't trigger improved quality of the products. Certified fish are more expensive, but in the end as vulnerable to disease and stress like fish, caught without using cyanide.

Schmidt: *So what would you recommend?*

De Jong: *I believe that knowledge is key to reach sustainability. No knowledge, no survival. The market regulates itself. It's up to legislation to define workable regulations for the wildlife trade. Meaningful regulation will be welcomed by all stakeholders, especially those who not only care for fast profit.*

Although (or maybe because) Arie De Jong is in the business since ages, his view is pretty surprising to somebody who thinks to know business and hobby. I appreciate people open-minded enough to tolerate other views and opinions. What we have in common is appreciation of the marine world. Nature rewarded Arie's love by making him detect a new species, now carrying his name. In shipments from Cuba he found specimens with unusual coloration, originally sent as *Gramma loreto*. Scientific studies proved his assumption to have identified a new species right. Since 2010 the shy, little basslet is named *Gramma dejongi*⁶.

Schmidt: *Arie, I thank you for this interesting and open conversation.*



⁶ **Gramma dejongi**, a New Basslet (Perciformes: Grammatidae) from Cuba, a Sympatric Sibling Species of *G. loreto* by Benjamin C. Victor and John E. Randall