

It all began in Olango. Only few people know that this small island, off Cebu City, is birthplace of the marine aquarium trade in South East Asia. In the 1960s¹ fish were collected for ornamental purposes and not food for the first time. Over time collectors refined their methods² and skills in order to satisfy the ever growing demand in the US and Europe. With their outrigger boats they travel the reefs, first in the vicinity of the bigger islands like Cebu and Luzon, then reaching out further and further to remote and pristine areas. Export centres established in Manila and Cebu ship the valuable catch worldwide. A network of middlemen developed on islands with several collection areas within reach (e.g. Bohol), but still Olango remains a main centre distributing marine ornamental life from all over the Philippines to the exporters.

Over the years the collectors from Olango became renowned for their skills, not only within the Philippines but also overseas. One can meet them nowadays around the globe, working in the marine aquarium trade; providing skilful and still reasonable priced labour. It was on



Batasan (close to Bohol) where I saw children hunting mandarin fish with their crafted spear guns. The idea originates from Olango, but the proud Barangay captain of Batasan told me that the local fishermen refined the spear gun – now a real piece of art. What started as game is now an effective catch method for some species with a long flight distance. When examining specimens of *Callionymidae* upon import or even retail closely, one might see the small injury, rather a skin irritation, just below the dorsal fin. This is caused by the spear gun. As many people don't believe me, I decided to document this method for evidence.



I hadn't visited the Philippines since the local office of MAC closed and the collectors training program stopped in 2008. In early 2012 I received an invitation by a local exporter. Just in time, as in this period also a discussion on *ecolabelling*³ started; exploring the need for environmentally friendly caught supply in the marine aquarium trade & hobby. It was due time to revisit the previously MAC Certified collection areas and do some research on the impact of the collector

training program and the certification efforts. Were there any long-term impacts beside certification of importers and retailers in market countries?

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The *Barangay-captain* of Hambongan is excited to meet me again. „For sure we remember who you are. We haven't forgotten MAC“. He points to some posters in tatters on the walls of his modest middleman facility. Reminders of better days. Gosh, what happened? It seemed to be the right way...However, the captain is not racking his brains about this – he and his team of collectors are *MAC-Certified collectors*⁴ – for all times! It makes Hambongan's collectors special and gives people a certificate that otherwise never graduated. Proudly, a



collector presents a barrier net, sponsored by MAC during the training. After 5 years it is still in use and not for sale (I'm buying parts of their equipment for the SAIA exhibition, but this special net is too valuable and not to be replaced easily). Still collectors from other islands in the vicinity are requesting training in collection techniques in order to be recognized by local buyers same as trained fishermen.

We move on to the *Barangay hall*, the community centre. It was here, where CCIF⁵, a partner organisation of MAC conducted its seminars on economics and financial bookkeeping. „Was there any benefit from it?“ I'm asking. The captain smiles vaguely. I understand...I remember my visit in 2005 to collectors in Palawan, who were participating in the MAC program, but were told that the requested financing of a desperately needed *air pistol*⁶ couldn't be processed. It might lead to dependency, was the logic. The value of the valve was around US\$ 50; my air ticket to be the messenger was US\$ 300 more. I could never understand that reasoning.



Some more background information on my former employer. When MAC was founded in 1998, it received quite some support and positive feedback. For good reason, I still think. A transformation of the marine aquarium trade was overdue. There was rumour about cyanide testing being obsolete, because the cyanide content of seawater being at levels to result in positive testing any time. Cyanide, like dynamite fishing causes reef destruction and became a

big topic in the market countries. Demand was rising to fight these threats to coral reef health at the root – in the source countries. As such MAC was most successful in fundraising to initiate programs to train collectors in net use and get them certified according to the quickly developed *Collection and Handling Standard*. However success of this program was limited and produced mixed results. Dollars were the main driver of participation and were offered as compensation to the fishermen when participating in the training, together with free food whenever MAC was in town. A general practice of NGOs to get a foot into the door...

Beginning in 2000 the first collectors and collection areas got certified in the Philippines. The main partner driving the program locally was Reef Check⁷, another NGO, who conducted reef assessments to produce the data needed to develop management plans for the local aquarium fishery. A second partner organisation, CCIF, tried to teach collectors bookkeeping and economising. The collaboration was flourishing and when MAC was successful in raising millions of dollars for the MAMTI-





project⁸ only the sky was the limit. MAC rented a huge office in central Manila's financial district, Manila, and started to employ people haphazardly. Salaries of the senior management seemed to be unreasonable, but were signed off by the MAC-Board⁹ without questions. Therefore a major part of funding went into the administrative overhead. Project evaluations by existing or potential funders took another good part in the wish to impress with luxury

hotels and nice travels. In order to access EU funding, I was employed and tasked to get Europe based importers and retailers certified. Many of those companies joined MAC with the perception that MAC would improve the situation in the supply countries and that their certification fee would support these projects (while actually

it was only paying the third party certifier and certification assessment). MAC missed this opportunity to raise awareness and present itself as a standard setting organisation and credible eco label. Instead, anybody, who wanted, got certified, often by certifiers who had not received training in the specifics of the MAC standards they were assessing against. Anywhere companies received certificates, if linked to each other or not.



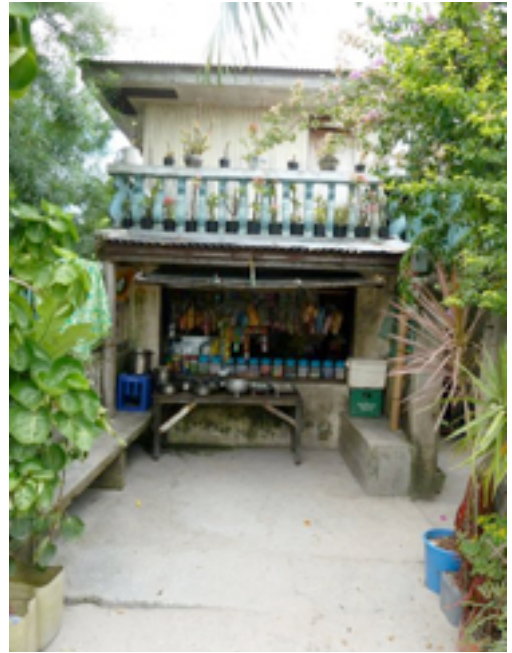
At the end MAC was presenting to its funders an illusion of a certified chain of custody, which was functional only theoretically at best. As a result certified product flow was sparse. Ultimately not even the funders could be blinded and realized that the project was not reaching the promised objectives. Major funding was withdrawn and MAC closed its offices in the Philippines and Indonesia to then abandon its activities overall.



Still a MAC label stands for exclusivity. Like the collectors in Hambongan, the European importers and retailers didn't forget about MAC... and some even managed to extend their certificate. Although hard to believe when trying to contact MAC otherwise, it is still possible to get certified against the MAC standards. All one has to do is contacting the third party certifier directly and ask for an assessment. When asking Arie of De Jong Marinelife why he didn't take off the MAC

label yet, he said: „...because I'm still supporting the original intentions of MAC. Moreover the MAC logo still helps in sales and demonstrates to my customers that I'm adhering to a certain standard.“ As in many eco labels consumers rarely question the meaningfulness of a standard and the label's claim.

The Barangay-captain continues the tour. It is a beautiful spot. Unusually clean and green, no trash is spoiling the impression of a tropical island on Hambongan. Huts are surrounded by little gardens with flowers. Poverty is not so obvious when hidden by beautiful surroundings. Still it exists. I learn that the captain managed to get its barangay involved in another NGO project, providing supplements to feed the children. Population is increasing heavily on the small islands, beyond capacity. All these children...on Hambongan they can go to primary school at least. On most other islands there is no access to education at all. Children learn from their parents and most boys end up as aquarium collectors, same as their daddy and grandpa. To stop population explosion, the local authorities limits the influx of new residents. A campaign on contraception would be more meaningful in my eyes, but the Philippines' very traditional catholic church does probably not agree.



Before dipping into the water, where collectors are waiting to demonstrate their skills, I pass the „Gate of Wisdom“ at the other end of the island for the second time in my life. Behind this door is something more valuable than anything in this world nowadays. The only undeveloped space on this island. Like a little park. Years ago they built a small guesthouse at the far end in the hope to attract tourism. Nobody came... Now no

concrete plans for the area exist.

I tell them „ If I had the choice, I would move in immediately.“ Everybody bursts in laughter. They invite me to have a closer look. I detect a little graffiti a the wall - „Punk's not dead!“

Well, that would fit somehow... I think.



How to proceed?



Interest in an eco label for the marine aquarium trade is rising again. Especially in English language media it is becoming a topic. Ret Talbot, well known author and photographer, introduced on *reefs.com* the company EcoAquariums from Papua New Guinea. This company markets its products with their own „eco label“. Furthermore the reader learns of Quality Marine’s *QM-Code tag program* based on smartphone and another wholesaler in L.A., who launched an eco label program with Reef Check called „Sustainably Managed Aquarium Resource Trade“ (SMART)... All these projects are solid first steps as they help buyers to learn about the origin of the wildlife in trade. Traceability is the backbone of sustainability, but it is not the only criteria of an eco label.

Cambridge Dictionaries online defines an eco label as “ *An official symbol, which shows that a product has been designed to do less harm to the environment than similar products.* “. Ecolabels are based on standards that a third party certifier¹⁰ assesses ‚production/producers‘ against.

What would be needed to establish a meaningful ecolabel in the marine hobby? Does it make sense to re-activate the Marine Aquarium Council (MAC)?

A lot speaks for it. MAC, as internationally unique and the only ecolabel in the aquarium trade, has established standards already. Certainly these can be improved, but why re-invent the wheel?

However, it is to clarify first, if demand is big enough to support an ecolabel (it is important to note that an ecolabel is not necessarily a certificate of product quality, although often expectations include quality aspects). Secondly we need to explore if buyers and consumers would be willing to spend more on sustainably sourced wildlife? And last but not least, can MAC regain trust at all? If response to these three questions were positive, it makes sense to develop thinking on MAC’s future, practicalities and what a new MAC would need to look like. And who will deliver the training to get collectors to a point where they can be certified at all? Certainly a conflict of interests MAC as standard setting body and implementer of its own standards was trapped in before.





Well, finally, I would like to share my impressions from underwater. Honestly, I never feel really safe in the deep blue. A four-meter long bull shark didn't contribute to making me feel comfortable. Well, better dealing with nervousness than surfacing too quickly. I have met many collectors who didn't care about decompression and had to learn the hard way.... My buddies today know better, also thanks to the training they participated in. They know well what

they are doing. At the end they helped me to shoot a video to demonstrate their elegant collection skills. The resulting movie „Aquarium Fishery Methods in the Philippines” will be part of the extended version of the SAIA exhibition „Where do our fish come from?"; available starting from fall 2012. If you are curious to see what I saw, please have a look at the trailer in our library.



I thank all collectors on Hambongan, Batasan and Olango. Special thanks goes to exporter and supporter TRME in Cebu.

Maraming salamat sa 'yo!

April 2012

Footnotes:

1. In some literature the start of the marine aquarium trade is dated even earlier (1950s).
2. Already in the 1960s cyanide was used to collect marine ornamentals.
3. Discussion included, among others, Chris Buerner (Quality Marine), Dan Navin (EcoAquariums) und Ret Talbot (Author).
4. A MAC Certificate was valid for 5 years to then be re-assessed and extended if the certificate holder is still in compliance with the standard's requirements.

The MAC collector training included non-destructive fishing methods, species identification, bookkeeping and financial management. To empower collectors, a first step was to form collectors groups so that financial resources can be put together and used for replacing equipment, etc.

5. Conservation and Community Investment Forum (CCIF) – US based Organisation working in securing financial support of local communities for conservation projects (e.g. micro-credits).
6. An air pistol is a nozzle used to dose oxygen from the tank when aerating transport bags. Filling the plastic bags with oxygen without overdosing and bursting them is a challenge without such valve.
7. „Become a marine biologist for an afternoon!“ Reef Check uses many volunteers for reef assessments. Laymen are trained for half a day to 2 days to then assess reefs by transects diving. Anybody from twelve years onwards and willing to spend € 350, can participate.
8. MAMTI was financially supported by the World Bank and MAC’s main project.
9. The MAC Board of Directors was composed by representatives from industry, hobby, science and conservationists, e.g. Chris Buerner (Quality Marine), Alex Ploeg (OFI) und Svein Fossa (author).
10. Third Party Certifiers are individuals or bodies accredited to assess and certify a producer/body/organisation according to a standard (e.g. ISO, MSC, MAC, etc.) another body/organisation sets.

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