

Walt smith international (Fiji Ltd started business operations in Lautoka in 1996. At first it was considered an expansion to the already established company in Tonga but it soon became clear that Fiji would be the home base of operations.

The company exports live marine products to distributors of the aquarium industry and public aquariums worldwide on a weekly basis. The company employ about 85 staff in the Lautoka facility and provides work for an additional 200 in various villages around Fiji.

Walt has been in this industry since 1972 and is recognized as an industry leader on sustainable harvest technique and high quality livestock that has put Fiji in the forefront as an example for other countries to follow. Both Walt and his wife Deborah are active, hands on directors of the company and have raised their two children in the island countries of Tonga and Fiji since 1989. The multi-million dollar facility in Lautoka was carefully built to ensure the health of the animals in their care would remain healthy and happy until export. The facility is constantly being upgraded with the latest technology as it becomes available to keep up with their policy of best environment for their animals.

Walt and Deborah were invited to expand to Fiji by the Fisheries department on a visit by the Fisheries to Tonga back in 1994. Walt was told by Fisheries that this was an emerging industry in Fiji and they wanted WSI to set the example of a proper holding facility based on the obvious investment and careful planning they saw in Tonga. To Walt and Deborah the move made sense because the large international airport would allow them to reach many destinations for their market that Tonga could not.

In 1997 Walt started doing some experiments with coral farming and the manufacture of artificial live rock. They were brought to market in 1998. At first it was difficult to get these products accepted by the customers. However, as time went on and better methods kept developing, the marketability of these products emerged as a substantial part of the overall export. WSI was the first country in the world to develop this new idea of coral farming into a commercial level and today there are about 16 countries around the world following Walt's example. A few of those countries have actually come to Fiji to learn from Walt and he welcomes the chance to share this information in those visits and in the many coral reef conferences he lectures at yearly around the world. As

Walt says “this is just another way we can contribute to the whole idea of a sustainable industry. We now grow more coral than we harvest yearly with over 90,000 pieces at one time on our farms during the experimental years. We are capable of planting 2,000 pieces per week and often do to keep up with demand”. Walt goes on to say that they are now on third and fourth generation in many species of the coral they grow and more than half of what they grow remains on the reef to create more generations to come.

Until these experiments were conducted by Walt little was known about coral growth and specie growth diversity. He relates “we were amazed to find that most types we were growing became market ready in just under a year. Now through advanced ideas and technology we have many pieces ready in just a few months. Some species we farm can grow up to 15cm per year. This is very exciting news for us to learn when we have all been told at a young age that coral takes hundreds of years to grow. Through this newly acquired knowledge we have been able to shed some light on the truth about many species. Although there are just a few species that grow very slowly these are not the types our market is interested in so we just concentrate on the fast growing, very small pieces”.

The artificial live rock is about the same story as the coral and about 1/3 of the rock they export is this type of rock. The rock is made from natural products found in Fiji and then placed in the water for about one year until it becomes ready for the market and exported by air to the final destination.

“It is the increase in this export of farmed products over the years that have inspired us to enter the Prime Ministers Exporter of the Year Award contest. We feel that there is little known about our activities and we are sometimes met with doubt when discussing issues on sustainability. This is one way to educate people what we stand for and bridge the gap for a better understanding. If by some chance we win one of the awards more will be known about our dedication to raise awareness of our marine ecosystem that we all share”.

WSI exports around 5M per annum and before the worldwide economic turndown it was about 7M. About half of that income goes directly to the freight companies and airlines. The villages that supply the live rock receive approx. F\$500,000 per year for their partnership. The rest goes to the many employees and local services within Fiji.

The main facility is often found to be host to the many schools around Viti Levu as hardly a week goes by that big yellow busses full of students and adults arrive with curious eyes to see the bright colorful fish and corals on display happy and alive. When Walt and Deborah are there they spend the time explaining the many wonders of the sea to the wide eyes and beautiful smiles of the young and curious.

Another example of education and awareness provided by WSI was at the Hideaway Resort on the coral Coast. Walt and his team installed the first ever coral walk and educational tour. The visiting tourist from any resort could take a guided tour of the coral farm just off the beach in front of the Hideaway. This was a free activity and was very popular among the visitors. The experiment was rewarded by winning the “International Ecotourism of the Year” award given out by the worldwide organization “SCARS” in Turkey. The plaque hangs in the lobby of the resort today.

The latest development is to follow Fisheries request that the Prime Minister would like to see export developed in the north. In response to this request WSI has expanded to Labasa and has invested in a similar but smaller facility that is now ready for operation. There are just a few logistical matters to attend to and this facility should be in full operation before the first of the year. This plan includes working with three local villages to teach them how to grow coral in the ocean. Under this plan WSI will visit them once a month and purchase what they grow directly from the farmers. This product will then be transported to the main facility in Lautoka to be exported overseas. WSI will provide the training and all the items needed on the farm to the village and plans to hire several people to work in the land based facility just newly built in Labasa.

Walt and Deborah are looking forward to a bright future that holds a better understanding of our underwater world. Their hope is that the awareness created by this industry and Walt’s pioneering accomplishments in coral farming will inspire those they meet to share what they have learned with others to become better stewards of our natural resources here in Fiji and wherever they may travel.