

Hello from the Coral Coast

I live near the Vatukarasa area. I am curious as to how long a certain area is to be harvested before it becomes unsustainable?

Also, I quote from your website, "They have trained locals in sustainable harvest technique" and "sustainable and low impact harvest".

Can you inform me as to how that part of it works. Of course I understand that it is income generating at present.

However, I'm sorry but all I see are people with pinch bars smashing out tons of their fishing grounds every day.

I have read through your website and there is not much mention of the 'how' involved in the sustainability of this industry.

Any information you could supply to help me understand this better would be appreciated.

Vinaka Vakalevu

Dear Brad and Tessa,

In response to your email I appreciate your concerns and would like to explain a little more about our activities so that you understand as you requested. I also appreciate the polite tone of your query as most that do not have an open mind to listen are quite the opposite and I have even had my life threatened on one occasion.

What you see being harvested on the coral coast is what our industry refers to as "Live Rock" however there is not much visible on the rock that can be described as live. We are mainly interested in old dead substrate that is void of any live forms of coral, sponge and macro algae. However, what this rock does possess are microscopic organisms that live within the rock and hard, encrusting coralline algae that is red to purple in color. This rock is used in aquariums around the world because it has the ability to stabilize the water conditions within a closed environment (aquarium) due to the microscopic organisms and red algae. People often mistake this as coral harvesting which it clearly is not. A close inspection would reveal old dead rocks covered in mud and large plant like material (Sargasso weed) called macro algae which we pull off at our facility. This macro algae is actually a huge nuisance to the reef because it covers everything and allows little else to grow. It is mostly responsible for problems of dying reefs on many of the island resorts (Tokoriki for example) and they scrape this stuff up off the beach daily using large front loaders running almost 24/7.

The reason we have targeted the coral coast is because it is an ideal location to locate this type of rock. If you spend much time in the water you will have noticed that the name coral coast is sort of a joke. There is not much coral on the coral coast but there probably was many years ago before logging started up in the hills behind Sigatoka and along the coast. I am sure you have noticed the red mud washing down the river and spreading along the coast like a red plague. This mud is full of rich nutrients and agricultural run-off. These nutrients and run-off are so strong that they literally smother coral with poison and elimination of essential sunlight for the coral to grow, since it is photosynthetic. However, it does produce rich growths of coralline algae and make perfect "live rock" which is useless to anybody but us. We target the coral coast because of this phenomenon. Live rock is a renewable resource that benefits both our company and the village. This has been proven true by many studies through the years generated by concern. There was a socio economic study carried out in Vatukarasa several years ago by the USP and this study proved our harvest is both sustainable and a valuable source of income that far outweighed any "perceived" notion that the reef was being harmed by our activities. Some scientist observed that there was no change in the substance fish catch over the years and in some cases the few holes that were temporarily created actually provided shelter for juvenile fish that would not normally settle there. I know this sounds like a far-fetched effort to defend myself but it has been said more than once by respected reef scientist who come to visit and/or write reports.

However, I must admit that it looks menacing by those that do not have full knowledge of some of these facts. Whenever you see piles of material coming off the reef being harvested by big men with crowbars the unaware will think the worst and I fully understand this and appreciate the opportunity to explain as you have given me. There is an old saying "whenever perception and reality collide, perception usually wins" and that is my cross to carry.

The simple facts are that:

- We have been working this same area since 1995 with no depletion of the resource. Live rock is a renewable resource but it does take time to grow. For this reason we have our crews constantly rotate areas up and down the coast throughout the year.
- We work with two villages (Namanda and Vatukarasa) in that area and support 70+ workers plus chiefs and local services on a weekly basis.
- We are generous with the share of the harvest. This week alone Vatukarasa earned about \$17,000.00 for the rock they sent to our facility in Lautoka. It is not always that high but it does reach this level often. This amount was shared among the workers and provides a high level of earning where little employment opportunities exist.

- We are the only company in Fiji that has initiated a “Collection Area Management Plan” and several impact studies as well as the socio economic survey I mentioned earlier.
- All of our export is monitored and reported weekly to The Department of Environment and regulated through quotas set by C.I.T.E.S. (Convention of International Trade of Endangered Species) a worldwide organization that Fiji is a signatory to and reports every export.

You might also be interested to know that I have the distinction of being recognized as the first person to start a commercial coral and live rock farm in the world. Back in 1998 I had the idea that live coral grew so fast that we could probably farm it. After a few experiments we found this to be true and started the first ever coral farm to supply our industry and replant damaged reefs. It was not long after that I decided that if I can grow coral I could also manufacture and grow rock.

Today we have over 90,000 pieces of coral growing on various farm sites in the Yasawas and Coral Coast and we make several tons of artificial live rock on a weekly basis.

Now you might say if you can grow coral and make live rock then why harvest it to begin with? This answer is complicated but although I have been promoting these products for many years they still only represent a minor portion of our export. The reason is that the industry has not fully accepted these products as a mainstay and still prefers the natural product although I do see a steady, yet gradual, change. It is far more expensive to make live rock than it is to harvest yet my commitment to this is that I charge no more for it in order to gain (slowly) industry confidence. Today we ship about 6 tons of man- made rock per month and it takes about one year to grow in the ocean after we manufacture it.

We also put in a coral walk at the Hideaway Resort many years ago which was one of our coral and live rock farms that could be visited by tourist along the coral coast. Although the new owners have neglected the project it was a big hit for many years that was interesting to visit (guided coral walk) and taught people how coral grew. This project won the International Eco Tourism Award in 1997. It also provided the village income as we harvested our man made rock and switched out the coral as it grew. We are responsible for planting many thousands of new coral over those years in front of the resort that grew on our farm.

I am sorry for the long explanation but felt you needed the background to understand the response. As you might be able to tell, the coral reef is my passion and I care for it dearly. Though my industry I am able to share the living world with people that could never get a chance to see a coral reef but are now educated with most of the issues through their hobby. It is often said that you only care about things you know and that Marine

Aquarium Hobbyist are the strongest supporters of reef conservation in the world. I have to include myself in this group.

If we ever get a chance to meet I hope that you have a better understanding for what it is I do and that you know you can always prevail upon me for any information concerning the ecology of our great coral reefs.

Kindly yours,

Walt Smith