

## **Live Rock vs. Boat Rock**

A lot of people in this industry and hobby have come to associate my name with Fiji live rock and for many years (I am told) was the best live rock in the industry. I have been proud of that acknowledgement and have worked hard to keep the reputation well earned.

As the price of air cargo continued to climb over the years and more players in Fiji entered the market a very strange phenomenon started to occur. As the cost of freight went up the price of rock started to rapidly decline. The reason for this is that the new companies thought it was a simple matter to pull rock off the reef and pack it in boxes right at the beach or in empty warehouses and take it to the airport in the next few days after they had enough boxes packed. Since there was no investment in the infrastructure and no money spent on a large system to cure the rock they could afford to undercut my prices easily and the, now famous, rock wars began.

As prices continued to plummet on the US market I struggled to keep pace with the new demand for lower prices or just simply lose my business. We already had a huge investment and we had the only live rock holding system in Fiji (and Tonga) that actually cleaned and cured our rock before shipments and now we were forced to work for almost no profit with huge payroll and operating expenses. Welcome to the reality of tropical fish wholesale operations!

It was about this time that one of my customers started to suggest that I ship my rock by boat. I resisted for over a year but finally decided to investigate how this could be done and maintain at least some level of quality the hobby was used to. I consulted several scientist for formulas and ran many experiments while testing several methods of packing and refrigeration until I finally discovered a mix of elements and temperature control that ensured the rock would arrive in "reasonable" condition. The elements I used were very expensive and every rock was dipped and then sprayed once in the box and this helped to retard the decay of the dying microorganisms over the long journey over the Pacific Ocean to Los Angeles. However, it was not quite as good as live rock that reaches its destination in less than 20 hours after packing but I was able to lower the price to meet market demand. I immediately wanted it to be known that this rock was shipped by boat but I was warned by my largest customers not to say a word. My technique seemed to be working fairly well so I saw no reason to rock the boat and I wasn't, after all, keeping any secrets from him. I later found out what he was telling his customers was quite another story but by this time the rest of the industry in Fiji got wind of my experiments and dropped the air freight rock as soon as they heard.

All this happened in about 2006 and there has been very little live rock that has been flown into the USA since. The rest of the world continued to support my "air freighted" rock but the US market was only concerned with getting the rock for as cheap as possible. On my many trips

back to the states after those years I would visit the some of the stores and actually be embarrassed by the quality of rock being sold at still high prices. What gives here? Who is pocketing the extra profit instead of passing it on to the consumer? By this time we now have four other players in the Fiji live rock market and the quality of live rock continued to decline as nobody seemed to be interested in using the technique I had developed to keep it as fresh as possible. The public was being deceived and there was nothing I could do about it.

At least some fresh live rock is essential in keeping your reef tank stabilized as the microorganisms continue to do their job. Boat rock is at best “base rock” with little or no life on or in it. The sad fact is that there are probably very few hobbyists today that actually remember what live rock should look like. Those that do remember the old days comment on the various forums with statements like “there is no such thing as Fiji live rock anymore” and my heart sinks when I see this. Of course there is plenty of Fiji live rock but the market has to be willing to pay for it! The funny thing is that a lot of people will be willing to pay much higher prices for Indonesian rock that is not as porous or attractive as “fresh” Fiji rock and this puzzles me.

I have been able to convince some of my customers to try the air freight rock and I pack this in a special box with gold letters that display the name “Fiji Ultra” and this has been met with mixed success. Some of them tell me that they have a hard time selling it at a higher price than boat rock so it sits in their warehouse for weeks and now it is not any better than boat rock when it finally goes out their door. However, this is only true with a few cases and a lot of them are preselling it so the customer does get it fresh.

My final conclusion is (and has to be) that there is a place for both types on the market but transparency must prevail. The customer must know what he is buying or it is all a lie. I have noticed that some of the newer hobbyists have been brainwashed to believe that boat rock is better because it is all dead and there will be no hitchhikers and this statement is very troubling to me. Live rock should be full of those little and microscopic critters ..... That’s why they call it “live rock” in the first place.

I know that I will get a lot of flak for speaking out about this from people who either don’t want the truth to be known or refuse to believe it but I hope I can count on at least some support to bring the hobby back to what it used to be. I do not understand why we are willing to spend all this money on the latest lighting, filters and gadgets and refuse to go the extra buck on good healthy livestock that is the basis of our captive environment.

The bottom line is ..... Learn the facts before you buy, know what you are getting and why you want it and treat the live and precious marine organisms in your care with the respect they deserve.

Walt Smith