

Buying Nemo

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By Sarah Osterhoudt, *E/The Environmental Magazine*

The popular animated movie *Finding Nemo*, a favorite in kids' video collections, traces the exploits of the young clownfish Nemo, who is captured by divers and plopped into a dentist office aquarium. But Nemo longs to return to the ocean and his father. Overall, the movie's message seems simple: Fish are unhappy trapped in tanks.



Yet did kids get the point? As clownfish sell out across the United States, the answer seems to be: not quite. Children want their own Nemo.

"Every kid who walks by the tanks yells, 'There's Nemo!'" said Seattle PetCo store manager JoLyn Nightingale, who noticed a marked increase in clownfish sales since the movie.

Vince Rado, sales manager of the tropical fish hatchery Oceans, Reefs, and Aquariums (ORA), said, "Clownfish were popular before *Finding Nemo*, but the movie was icing on the cake." Rado — who describes the ORA as "the world's largest supplier of Nemos" — said that marketing off the momentum of the movie also contributed to rising sales.

Although this clownfish-buying fad seems innocent, it poses real harm to tropical reef ecosystems, the natural home of Nemo and his friends. Though hatcheries such as ORA do not remove fish from coral reefs, other suppliers do.

"Collectors sometimes use bleach and cyanide chemicals to stun fish," said Brian Huse, executive director of the Coral Reef Alliance. "This causes permanent harm to reef communities."

Coral reef ecosystems, already one of the most threatened environments on the planet, face significant challenges even without meeting the demands of Nemo-loving children.

"We lost 15 to 30 percent of reefs in the last generation and we stand to lose up to 50 percent in the next 50 years," Huse said. "We shouldn't be taking more pieces out for the aquarium trade."

Another risk of the Nemo craze is to the fish themselves. As salt-water species, clownfish are difficult to keep.

"You can't just buy a fish and put it in a bowl," Nightingale warned. Instead, parents and children serious about maintaining a saltwater aquarium must invest time and money into the enterprise and continue to care for the fish even after the Nemo hype has faded away.

A Disney movie sparking a pet fad is not new. David Helvarg, president of the Blue Frontier Campaign, compares the current interest in buying Nemo with the rush to purchase Dalmatian puppies after the release of *101 Dalmatians*. Parents often gave the puppies away to pounds after realizing that raising a real puppy was not the same as watching one on screen. It is a distinction, Helvarg argues, that our mass-market culture too often misses.

"People need to realize that enjoying a cartoon about a reef doesn't mean you should go and establish one in your living room," he said.

And for the more ecologically minded child who understood Nemo's message that fish long to be free? There is something they, too, should remember: Don't flush your fish alive. For despite the

movie's mantra, not all drains lead to the ocean.

Name: _____

Date: _____ Period: _____

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Article questions

1. What type of fish is Nemo?
2. What is the simple message of the movie determined by this author?
3. What has JoLyn Nightingale noticed?
4. How do fish collectors capture aquarium fish?
5. What is the current status of coral reefs worldwide?
6. When has this type of pet fad happened before?
7. What are your thoughts on the subject?