

Some of the decreases in import figures can be explained by increases in local production, but unfortunately these changes do not explain the entire reduction in numbers with a reduction in the size of the industry, said Mr Pit.

Another reason for declining fish numbers is due to Australia's changing living arrangements. More and more people are living in apartments or smaller living spaces, which is resulting in consumers having smaller tanks at home.

"The classic 6-foot tank is being replaced with much smaller tanks, including desk/bench top nano tanks," he said. "With smaller tanks, there is a decrease in the number of fish per tank, and therefore a decrease in the number of fish in circulation."

Additionally, pet retail sector is seeing a greater abundance in the type and cost of fish foods in the market with consumers purchasing higher quality diets, as they are aware that a higher quality diet will generally lead to reduced water quality issues in their tanks, said Mr Pit.

"We are now also seeing an increase in the marine keeping hobby in Australia, which is in part due to the greater availability of lights and filtration equipment required for keeping corals at home. These corals are also becoming a lot more available than they were previously," he said.

Planted freshwater tanks are also becoming popular, especially with the increase in availability of laboratory produced plants (ie Tissue Culture Plants), which - while small - are pest and pathogen free, he added.

When it comes to expenditure on fish products, the vast majority of spending is still in-store, said Mr Pit. "While online platforms are increasing, including a jump in the amount of trade via social media platforms or buying sites, a significant amount of trade is still in-store," he said. "Some of the large pet stores now offer click-and-collect, making the purchase of some fish food or a new heater very easy

in a society where time is of the essence."

Despite the wealth of info-entertainment online, the 'local fish store' has always been a place to inspire potential fish keepers, he continued.

"While it is now very easy to research online or check out YouTube clips of other fish keepers, nothing beats heading into the store to talk to someone who is experienced and can provide advice about the type of fish that you are interested in and hopefully help and guide you as you enter this amazing, relaxing and 'healthy' hobby!" said Mr Pit.

### CHALLENGES FACING AQUARIUM RETAIL

Between Snapchat, Netflix and Minecraft online, kids are far removed from the natural world and this impacts on keeping aquarium fish. The biggest challenge facing the aquarium retail sector is educating and getting kids engaged in fish keeping, said Mr Pit. Many fish lovers also have the misconception that aquarium keeping is difficult and requires a lot of maintenance; but it is easier than you think using today's modern aquariums.

"Aquarium products have taken advantage of today's technology. Aquariums now have Wi-Fi capability, such as lights that enables the user to change the settings while sitting on the couch, or being able to 'spy' on your tank via webcam while relaxing on your beach holiday," said Mr Pit.

Fish keepers can also use water quality monitoring systems for freshwater and marine tanks that are APP-based and can notify them if the pH has changed or the temperature is outside of the parameters. In the marine space, machines can test the amount of calcium and magnesium that is in the tank and will automatically adjust it.

"So many people are interested in fish and many people who once had a fish tank

had a bad experience and thought it's too hard because they killed all the fish. We need to educate these people that it's not hard as long as you follow a few simple steps," said Mr Pit.

"People are happy to feed their dog, change its water bowl, give them a flea and tick tablet once a week, but fish keepers seem to want to just add the fish and hope they will be fine. Fish are a fantastic pet and have so much character, so ensuring they are fed correctly, have their water changed and ensure the correct water quality for the particular fish, they are as much fun as the family's four-legged friend."

The inaugural PIAA 'Growing the Aquarium Industry' event held last year in Melbourne was a sellout, with a number of educational seminars hosted at SEA LIFE Melbourne on growing the aquatics section in retail. The AusPet Conference in October is also expected to be a great success with a number of aquatic talks on the agenda, said Mr Pit.

### THE RISE IN REPTILE OWNERSHIP

Mr Grima attributes some of the loss in the aquarium business to the increasing popularity of keeping reptiles instead. In fact, for the first time in 2016, Animal Medicine Australia's Pet Ownership Study also examines reptiles (and small mammals) as pets, separating them out from the 'other pets' category used in 2013. The AMA report shows the rate of reptile ownership at 3% and the total estimated population at more than 415,000 nationally. Interestingly, half of these households keep lizards, 30% own snakes, 12% have tortoises and 11% keep frogs or salamanders. The main reason for acquiring a reptile was for companionship (34%), but people also enjoyed them for relaxation (17%) and entering competitions as a hobby (14%). Furthermore, the annual expenditure on reptiles estimated at \$158 million.

"Reptiles are in growth because they are a low-cost pet that requires minimal maintenance and can be kept in small homes/apartments. They are fascinating creatures to most people," said Mr Grima.

The trade and keeping of reptiles are regulated on a state-by-state basis, and the laws are subject to change. In most cases, licenses are also required to own a reptile.

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