



Many ornamental fish traders live below the poverty line – they cannot afford to register or maintain the strict standards which are unrealistic in their circumstances

Notification G.S.R. 493 (E) is the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Aquarium and Fish Tank Animals Shop) Rules 2017, which was on the verge of crippling the Indian ornamental aquatic industry a few months ago. Thus, in just one paragraph, the Indian authorities reversed their decision taken last May to “revolutionize” the nation’s ornamental aquatic sector in a way that would lead to its collapse.

Regular readers of this column will be aware that I frequently refer to the value of, and need for, commonsense in matters relating to legislation, as well as of my frustration when this valuable and essential criterion is swept aside without rhyme or reason. Consequently, it is with considerable pleasure that I can report that commonsense has prevailed. However, don’t let’s kid ourselves that this turnaround has come about because government ministers have had the good sense to reflect on their earlier decision without any prompting. Far from it!

The fact is that, as soon as the original Notification was issued last May, both India’s national trade sector, as well as the international ornamental aquatic community, were mobilized in a global effort to attempt to get the unjust and unwarranted requirements of the new law reversed, or, at least, reviewed and revised. So the decision didn’t just happen; it was prompted by such a widespread outcry that the authorities had little option but to reconsider their earlier decision.

I won’t go over all the controversial issues contained in the original Notification again here. I would, however, direct interested readers to my article of a few months ago in which I discussed the most relevant aspects of the new law. I also provided links to the full text of the Notification, and to a rather misguided article which appears to have had considerable influence on proceedings.

I would also like to highlight one or two things which have probably influenced the latest U-turn. For instance, in referring to the registration fee of RS 5,000 which each trader had to pay, Patit Paban Haldar, a member of the West Bengal Ornamental Fish Association, had this to say: “Many ornamental fish traders live below the poverty line – they cannot afford to register or maintain the strict standards which are unrealistic in their circumstances”.

Therefore, even if all the other requirements of the Notification had been reasonable and acceptable (which they were not), the mere fact that a significant number of traders would not have been able to afford the registration fee, with or without the added economic burden presented by the numerous other demands, would have meant the closure of an important part of the sector, with all the accompanying social and economic problems that this would present for many local communities.

Then, of course, even those who could have managed the fee would have had many other demands to comply with. One of these was the banning of bowls and tanks holding less than 4.55 litres of water for every inch of fish. The implications of this ruling would have been unbearable for many traders who would have had to dispose of all those tanks which didn’t meet this criterion, with all the added replacement expense that this would involve.

The fact is that not all fish require the same volume of water per inch. As I asked in my original article: “Is one inch of guppy the same as one inch of pleco?” The problem for those involved in marine fish and invertebrates would, obviously, have been even more serious. So, even traders who could have afforded the registration fee could have been driven out of business.

I am just scratching the surface here, of course, since many other factors

will have influenced the new decision, not just these. Particularly influential will have undoubtedly been the representations from official agencies, such as various State Governments, to Central Government.

At the end of the day, though, the important thing is that the Indian ornamental aquatic sector has been brought back from the brink of extinction. We must therefore commend the Indian Central Government for having the courage to listen and take this major step. Don’t let’s forget, however, that those concerned are still the same people who bowed to anti-trade pressure and proceeded with the ban without consulting anyone, other than the anti-trade campaigners. Could they therefore change their mind again if a new anti-trade attack were to be launched? Let’s hope not! ■



TRADING IN MARINES WOULD HAVE BECOME A TOTAL IMPOSSIBILITY FOR MANY BUSINESSES HAD THE ORIGINAL NOTIFICATION BEEN ENFORCED. PHOTO: JOHN DAWES

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