



FOR A FEW WEEKS, FIJI'S RAMSAR NOMINATION FOR ITS REEFS SPILT GREAT DANGER FOR THE ISLAND NATION'S SUSTAINABLE LIVE CORAL AND LIVE ROCK SECTOR.  
PHOTO: CREATIVE COMMONS

# FIJI'S CORALS BACK IN TRADE

2018, the International Year of the Reef, kicked off with a bang for Fiji – a really loud one! To celebrate the launch of this important 'Year', Fiji's Prime Minister, Frank Bainimarama, nominated large sections of Fiji's Great Sea Reef as a Ramsar site to protect it from a range of threats, including industry.

Ramsar, the Convention on Wetlands, is an intergovernmental treaty that "provides the framework for national action and international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources." While most such wetlands are represented by inland waters, i.e. swamps, rivers, etc., the interpretation of the term is so wide that it also takes in coastal habitats, be they mangroves or reefs.

PM Bainimarama's decision would seem to have been a reason for widespread rejoicing on the part of all those of us who take the conservation of our planet's natural resources seriously. So... why didn't we all rejoice?

The main reason for our reservations was that sometime between Xmas and New Year's Eve, Fiji's Ministry of Fisheries and Forests unexpectedly announced that Fijian live coral and live rock exports were being banned with immediate effect. The industry was, understandably, stunned, not just by the announcement itself, but by the fact that it came without any consultation or forewarning, that it was made during what is the quietest period in the industry's calendar when most of us are enjoying a few days' hard-earned respite with our loved ones, that no 'period of grace' had been granted... and that such an important and far-reaching announcement had been made via Facebook.

It would have been unfair to have pronounced judgement on these points at the time without the benefit of an open exchange of correspondence, or a face-to-face conversation with those responsible for the decision, thus allowing them the courtesy and opportunity to explain themselves, rather than allowing a less-than-complimentary opinion of their actions to spread like wildfire throughout the international ornamental aquatic community. The thing is that when such unilateral actions are taken by authorities, it is easy to accuse those who take them of all manner of wrongdoing. Yet, it sometimes turns out that such situations arise, not from a desire or an intention to restrict any particular party's activities, but from a basic and unintended lack of understanding on the part of the legislators regarding some fundamental factors, or an unawareness of the unfortunate and unforeseen consequences of their decisions.

And so it's turned out to be with regard to this ban. I am therefore happy to report that, as I write these lines, the ban has been lifted by the Fijian authorities. This makes total sense, because, up to now, we had had very little in the form of clarification from the Ministry of Fisheries and Forests. There had been some sort of explanation for the ban from the Fisheries Minister, Semi Koroilavesau, which, while it may sound sensible at a superficial level, still left many matters unaddressed and unanswered. According to the Minister, "... the ban is based on the idea that a lot of the corals are dying... Our commitment also means protecting the coral system and maintaining a healthy ocean, and that's why we are doing it now... We need to protect our marine resources, and we will stay committed to it."

