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Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Treaties
Department of House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Friday, June 06, 2008

To Whom it may concern,

I write to give my support to the present “exemptions” to sawfish capture and commercial sale granted to Cairns Marine (CM) and why it should not be removed.

I have been supplied with a copy of the Human Society International (HSI) submission dated 23 April, 2008, in relation to the listing of the family of Sawfish (Prisidae) and I feel that the committee should be aware of alternative views than that supplied by HSI. I strongly agree with HSI’s statement that sawfish are rare and endangered, but to close the aquarium trade and not allow animals to be caught and transferred to public aquariums will do more to harm the conservation of these species than HIS realizes. As such, moving saw fish from appendix II to appendix I, does not seem a logical approach if the overall conservation of the group is the main concern. I have outlined my reasons for this statement below.

To date there has been very limited success in breeding of sawfish in captivity. As far as I am aware, only one aquarium (Atlantis, based in the Bahamas) has produced offspring of sawfish (*Pristis pectinata*, a non Australian species), however these offspring did not survive, dying at birth due to predation in the tanks and/or misadventure (namely being killed by filtering equipment). It appears that the custodians of the aquarium were unaware that the animals were pregnant. This is not a reflection of the aquariums ability to rear animals, but more so a reflection on the fact that little is known about saw fish. Hand in hand with the lack of breeding success in saw fish in worldwide aquariums is the fact that little if any research is presently being done on captive reproduction of these animals and that which is being carried out is done so by the aquariums themselves. If the capture of wild specimens is ceased, attempts to build stocks of animals capable of breeding in aquaria will be halted. In addition it would only then be a matter of time before animals in captivity die and members of the public will not be able to see these animals “in the flesh”. As a result, it will be even harder than it presently is to raise the profile of the plight of these animals. Notably, once organisms are placed on CITES lists, they are notoriously difficult to have removed from the list, even when they are no longer under any

threat. Similarly, it is incredibly difficult to receive permission to conduct research on CITES listed animals, with the vast majority of researchers tending to avoid studies on these listed animals due to the added difficulty CITES paperwork brings. If the committee is truly interested in the conservation of Australian Sawfish, they should leave at least one avenue (namely wild collection by qualified organisations) for researchers to access.

My major concern with restricting the collection of these animals for the aquarium trade is that, with no live specimens present for people to see, this group of animals will drop off the radar into obscurity. Presently the chances of anyone seeing these animals in the wild is extreme at best. If they can not be captured to display in public aquaria, where will the general public see them?

Placing these animals on the CITES list and having a total restriction on their collection will, as listed above, make research on these animals very difficult. They are already notoriously difficult to work with due to many factors, such as their isolated geographic position in Australia, and the skills required to catch the animals without injury. As such it takes a wealth of expertise and funding to collect and return them to the laboratory. I have been involved in research on other CITES protected animals, such as Cairns Birdwings (*Ornithoptera euphorion*) and once they were placed on the CITES list the amount (and quality) of research carried out on this species decreased significantly, mainly due to the direct problems in gaining access to the animals. If the committee wishes further research to be carried out on Australian sawfish, it must allow ease of access to these animals, and one way is to allow small numbers to be caught and placed in aquaria.

I have conducted research in the past (and am still doing so) on Saw fish in Australian waters and without the ability for Cairns Marine to collect these animals and place them in captivity I would be unable to carry out the research. Notably, the research is not blue sky research, but applied and aimed at decreasing the bycatch of sawfish in net fisheries in northern Australia, i.e. directly related to the conservation of sawfish. The research being carried out, in collaboration with CM and QDPIF is aimed at using magnetic arrays to keep sawfish out of nets used in the Northern Australian gill net fisheries. Without the help and resources of CM this project would not (and probably could not be) run.

I agree with the comments by HIS that CMA are involved in the collection of sawfish for commercial gain, but I do not believe that this is the sole (or even the main reason!) reason. This company has a very long and involved history in research and conservation of marine animals and much of what we know about the behaviour of many marine fish in tropical Australian waters is due to information gathered by them and passed on. It is worthwhile noting that CM are presently (and have been for quite a while) strategically placing both male and female sawfish at aquariums in an attempt to set up breeding colonies. If this company was collecting sawfish for commercial gain, they WOULD NOT be sending both male and female animals to any one aquaria, rather like several other marine species (eg Leafy Sea Dragons) supplied by other companies they would send just males, and hence ensure a monopoly by restricting the breeding of sawfish in captivity. Rather, CM are truly interested in the conservation of Sawfish and by removing their ability to collect these animals in limited numbers you would severely hamper the forward movement of conservation of this species.

In closing I would strongly urge the committee to support the current exemptions to the listing of sawfish in northern Australia as I believe this will result in increased research on the animals and will ultimately result in the conservation of the species. Having a blanket restriction on the collection and the restriction of the trade of these animals in public aquariums will doom them to a very fragile future, with the very real possibility that they will split into obscurity making the raising of their profile very difficult. The professional collection and display of these animals will certainly minimize the possibility of this happening.

As such, I DO NOT recommend that Australia propose the up listing of *Pristis microdon*, Freshwater sawfish from Appendix II to Appendix I, without any annotation, to the 15th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties (CoP15).

I would be more than happy to discuss any of the issues raised above should the committee deem it useful

Sincerely

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