

The Palm Beach Post

Finding Nemo getting tougher? Protection considered for clownfish

Wednesday, Sept. 3, 2014

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The orange clownfish — the striped reef dweller made popular by the Disney cartoon character Nemo — may warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act because of ocean acidification and potential over-harvesting for the aquarium trade.

The National Marine Fisheries Service announced Tuesday that it will conduct a status review in response to a 2012 scientific petition by the Center for Biological Diversity, which cited the fish's popularity — it is the fifth most popular fish imported in the U.S. for aquariums — and threats from ocean acidity, believed to be caused by carbon dioxide pollution.

"Finding Nemo's getting harder as global warming and acidifying oceans destroy the coral reefs the clownfish calls home," said Shaye Wolf, climate science



The orange clownfish is under consideration for listing as an endangered or threatened species. (2003 Post file photo by Taylor Jones)

director at the Center. "Endangered Species Act protection and meaningful action to put the brakes on greenhouse gas pollution will help make sure these beautiful fish survive in the wild and not just in the movies."

The orange clownfish, which inhabits Coral Triangle region of the tropical Indo-Pacific, spends nearly its entire life protected within anemones on coral reefs. Rising ocean temperatures reduce anemone size and numbers. Ocean warming degrades and destroys coral reef habitat by increasing the frequency and intensity of mass bleaching events, while ocean acidification slows coral growth.

Ocean acidification has also been shown to damage the smell and hearing of orange clownfish. When exposed to the levels of carbon dioxide expected later this century, young clownfish become attracted to their predators and are unable to find their coral reef homes.

The orange clownfish may also face threats from the global marine aquarium trade. The United States is the world's largest importer of ornamental marine fish, and clownfish are among the most commonly traded species worldwide. Studies suggest that clownfish and other anemonefish are suffering population declines in the wild because of over-harvesting for the aquarium trade.

Comments can be submitted online via the Federal eRulemaking Portal at www.regulations.gov/#!docketDetail;D=NOAA-NMFS-2014-0072. Mail submissions should be sent to Regulatory Branch Chief, Protected Resources Division, Pacific Islands Regional Office, NMFS Protected Resources Division, 1845 Wasp Blvd., Building 176, Honolulu, HI, 96818. The deadline for submitting comments is Nov. 2.