



Kevin Barden and the team of marine biologists at the University of Florida are the first to breed blue tangs in captivity.

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Saving Dory

With the popularity of "Finding Dory," another Hollywood-fueled pet craze is upon us – this time with fish illegally harvested from the wild, with no thought for them or the ecosystem

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Who'd all love to own a cute film animal, wouldn't we? A rat that sits on your shoulder and helps you make the dinner, perhaps. Or a Mutant Ninja Turtle to eat pizza with. Or a ginger tabby, like Street Cat Bob, who makes his film debut in November, and raises a paw to do clever high-fives. Who wouldn't want these guys as pets? It's the stuff every kid's dreams are made of.

And thanks to Pixar's "Finding Dory" you can bet that parents everywhere will find themselves pestered to come up with the goods, in the form of a photogenic blue tang.

Unfortunately, the reality is a lot less appealing than the winsome character voiced by Ellen DeGeneres. And it could be an environmental disaster waiting to happen.

There have been plenty of cute critter film heroes, from Bambi to Babe. But clownfish are the first species in the animal kingdom to drastically suffer from their silver screen fame. Back in 2003, "Finding Nemo" created a demand for the small

orange and white stripey fish that has almost taken the species towards extinction. More than one million clownfish are illegally harvested from the Great Barrier Reef every year, with 90 percent of the clownfish being supplied from the wild.

Karen Burke Da Silva, a marine biologist at Flinders University in southwest Australia, was so concerned that a decade ago she and a group of colleagues founded Saving Nemo, a project that aims to solve the problem by breeding clownfish in captivity and supplying them to aquariums.

"There was a dramatic increase in demand after the movie, and there continues to be a large interest in clownfish as pets and in the marine aquarium trade in general," she said. "The industry is huge, with millions of dollars being spent and millions of fish being taken from the wild."

The impact that "Finding Nemo" had on the wild clownfish population has been devastating but at least they can exist comfortably in a tank, if they survive the leap from the reef to your house. The blue tang is a different kettle of fish.

"I am particularly concerned about the

future of the blue tang," said Da Silva. "If the craze takes off then we have a real problem, since 100 percent of them are being taken from the reef and this species could be in real trouble if illegal fishing practices persist."

Approximately 300,000 wild blue tang were being traded globally in preparation for demand due to "Finding Dory." But buying one could be a painful mistake. "If these fish are taken into captivity, they don't make great pets," said Da Silva. "They have a toxic spine that can deliver a big sting, and they grow too big for most home aquaria."

You would need at least a 75-gallon tank if you wanted to house your own Dory as they grow up to a foot long. Not so cute now, is she?

Of course, pet crazes are nothing new. Simon Drew, a scientist in geography at Newcastle University in England, recalls the misadventure that followed his brother's insistence on getting terrapins after seeing the original Mutant Ninja Turtles film in the late 1980s, when they were readily available in pet shops but with little information on their care. "Mum was