

Call to end sea dragon trade

by JENNY D'ANGER

TINY, weedy sea dragons found off Fremantle are victim to their own cuteness and Freo marine activists are calling on the Barnett government to protect them.

The only place in the world the delicate creatures (related to sea horses) are found is in Australia's southern waters from WA to NSW.

Sold for aquariums, their fussy diet of live food usually dooms them, says Freo local Kerry Fletcher: "Usually in about eight weeks they are dead."

Threatened

The Australian Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 lists the weedy sea dragon nationally as a threatened species and catching them is banned in every state—except WA.

"This government gives out licences to take and sell them to the aquarium trade," Ms Fletcher says.

A regular snorkeler off local beaches she says numbers appear to be down and she and partner Mark Binns have now joined forces with Cottesloe Coastcare Association to gather

signatures on a petition calling for their protection.

"Even people with licences are not catching as many," Coastcare's Robyn Benken says.

WA fisheries minister Norman Moore says there's no evidence to suggest the dragons are under pressure from fishing and his department says catch numbers are sustainable, "based on the known wide distributional range of the weedy sea dragons throughout southern Australian waters and the very low level of catch".

UWA Ocean Institute's Anne Brearley says not enough is known about the dragons to determine their sustainability.

"The concern is we don't know how many we have".

The "iconic" dragons should be protected and the government should conduct a stock assessment as a priority says WA conservation council local Tim Nicol.

The weedy sea dragon display at Monterey Bay Aquarium in California gets more visitors than the great white shark, making them a must-have item and increasing pressure on numbers.

Fremantle library has the petition or go to www.facebook.com/weedyseadragons.



• Freo local Kerry Fletcher and twins Mahla and Ruby aren't alone in wanting the weedy sea dragon protected. Photo by Jeremy Dixon



• The weedy sea dragon is too cute for its own good. Photo by Mark Binns