Welcome and introduction

1. The Chair, S Wensley, welcomed attendees to the seventh meeting of NTCAWG, convened to focus specifically on the matter of wild-caught fish for the ornamental pet trade. A particular note of welcome was recorded to Matt Metselaar (FVS), Lynne Sneddon (University of Gothenburg) and Malcolm Morley (BVA JVP), all of whom were attending for the first time.

Background and context

2. The working group had completed its original programme of work earlier in the year but following concerns raised by FVS in relation to the draft recommendations calling for a ban on wild-caught fish to be kept as pets, the further progression of the draft position had been paused in order to address those concerns. A summary of the chain of events, and associated discussions at Policy Committee, Ethics and Welfare Advisory Panel, and Council had been provided as part of the meeting papers.

3. S Wensley thanked FVS colleagues for providing the report and evidence which would be the focus of the discussion, whilst also taking into account the ethical considerations associated with wild capture.

4. M Metselaar reiterated previously expressed concerns that FVS evidence had not been given due consideration, and that those who opposed wild-capture had failed to provide evidence to support their views, relying solely on opinion. S Wensley explained that the veterinary profession was operating in society, and there was a need for animal welfare and ethical leadership – ethics could not be dismissed. M Leach agreed, explaining that scientific evidence was of course key, but so was comprehensive ethical evaluation. Ethical principles were especially valuable in cases like this, where evidence was lacking on both sides of the argument. M Metselaar considered that there was no evidence of public concern around wild-caught fish and that BVA was trying to equate wild-caught fish with wild-capture of other species because of a desire for a polished policy where everything fitted neatly. M Morley drew parallels with the debate around the role of badger control in TB eradication, where the working group had worked hard to listen to each other and hear all of the evidence, including welfare and ethical standpoints, before coming to a balanced conclusion. It was agreed that was important in all of BVA’s policy development.

Tropical Marine Centre

5. BVA Officers and BVA’s Policy and Governance Director had visited the Tropical Marine Centre on 8 August, joined by representatives from FVS, OATA, and the TMC for a tour of the facility. This had been followed by a presentation, covering sustainable sourcing and the global trade, ecological and societal benefits, and regulatory controls. A particular note of thanks was recorded to FVS for organizing the visit. A number of observations made during the course of the visit had been circulated to the working group as part of Enclosure 2.

6. BVA President, J Shotton, reported that the TMC facility was clearly state of the art in its approach
to fish health and biosecurity. However, there was little enrichment provided in the tanks and abnormal behaviour had been witnessed in some individuals – if similar behaviour was seen in zoo collections, then these would be investigated and addressed. It was also felt that using low mortality in the facility as a welfare measure was too simplistic as it did not recognise the welfare needs of the fish. The role of the trade in supporting local communities was undoubtedly an important consideration, as was the role TMC played in growing coral for the repopulation of reefs.

7. L Sneddon agreed that TMC was the jewel in the crown of the trade, however, not all retailers would be of the same high standard. She noted that there were welfare assessment guidelines available, and it was important to be cognisant of sentience and the welfare needs of fish. As things stood, fish were being treated in a way that would not be considered acceptable in mammalian species. Transport times of up to three days in the same water also seemed to be less than optimal.

8. S Wensley invited working group members to consider the potential discrepancy between attitudes to wild-caught fish, in comparison to the wild-capture of other species. In discussion the following points were made:
   - Wild-caught animals were more likely to suffer in barren environments than those bred in that way.
   - Many species of animal did well in captivity. Failure to breed was often a useful indicator that something was missing from the captive environment.
   - Certain species of marine fish were more likely to be stressed by a barren environment.
   - Captive bred fish generally tended to cope better with barren environments than those which were wild-caught.

9. M Metselaar agreed that fish did feel pain and their welfare should of course be considered. He noted that some species of fish might have higher mortality rates because of the way they were captured, although these were not sources which TMC would use. Keeping fish in barren tanks was a temporary measure, which helped support good biosecurity in the quarantine environment, although enrichment could be provided in certain circumstances. Transport times of up to three days did occur, but with good preparation it was the FVS view that this was acceptable practice.

10. L Sneddon suggested that BVA could recommend enrichment in tanks, even in quarantine. M Metselaar indicated that this could be a recommendation which FVS could support.

11. W Wildgoose reiterated previously raised concerns that insufficient time had been devoted to consideration of the evidence, and it was disappointing that FVS was being required to revisit the issue, particularly given the vote amongst FVS members where 10 out of 14 had said they could not support the proposed call for a ban on wild-caught. He remained concerned that working group members and others within the BVA policy development process held pre-conceived ideas which meant that FVS representations and evidence were not being heard.

12. M Leach explained that the role of EWAP was to focus on welfare and ethics. Where the evidence was limited, which was the case on both sides of the debate, EWAP would take a precautionary approach, which was a common ethical principle especially when it came to animals.

13. R Pizzi outlined the BVZS response to the FVS report, which had been posted on Glasscubes, which stated “We share and acknowledge the FVS view that the UK leading the way on responsible and sustainable collection and/or breeding of aquatic animals for the pet trade, will have a greater international impact, by illustrating best practice, than might be achieved by an outright ban.” The statement aimed to be pragmatic, given that the amount of time being taken to resolve the issue would potentially lead to further difficulty achieving approval for the position within BVZS Council.

14. J Chitty reminded the working group that the original statement on non-traditional companion animals had excluded fish because of the dearth of evidence. That could remain an acceptable option again.

15. M Morley considered that generally the profession was too slow to show leadership on the social license of animal use. S Wensley queried whether excluding fish for a second time, seven years after the original decision, could lead to increased scrutiny – especially as recognition of fish sentience and welfare has risen up the agenda in that time - which might be challenging.
16. Working group members had been invited to review the FVS report and evidence, and other papers circulated in advance of the meeting. In light of the evidence, it was proposed that the working group should consider three possible options for the way forward:

a) Continuing with the original draft recommendations, without the support of FVS.

b) Redraft the recommendations to favour a move away from wild-capture in the fullness of time, with better underpinning regulation and supported by improvements to captive-breeding programmes that improved welfare outcomes.

c) Exclude fish entirely from the position.

17. In discussion the following points were made:

- If fish were removed entirely then the group was simply avoiding dealing with a difficult issue. More work needed to be done to keep fish in scope.
- Leadership was needed. Leaving the issue for another seven years was not appropriate.
- Forming an entirely separate and new group to look at fish welfare was not something BVA had the capacity to resource in the foreseeable future.
- A call for a ban would alienate FVS colleagues and the sector.
- Everyone supported positive welfare and environmental outcomes. With that in mind, setting shorter term achievable goals, whilst still being aspirational, could be a way forward.
- It was important to be at the table and work with industry to embed ethical principles.
- FVS could not support a call for a ban.
- It would be helpful to understand whether FVS was agnostic to wild-capture and simply felt the status quo should remain, or whether there was a desire for the industry and wild-capture to be championed.
- FVS accepted that improvements could be made, but there were no issues of serious concern.
- There was scope to develop operational welfare indicators (eg fin position)
- FVS had concerns regarding the EWAP comparison with the capture of cetaceans for entertainment purposes, which could alienate the sector as a statement. It was clarified that EWAP was not public or media facing and that the particular part of the EWAP minutes being referred to was simply a record of comments made during discussion, exploring a principle, rather than representing a consensus view from the panel.
- Excluding fish from the position would be conspicuous and it was not ethically defensible to make out that the considerations were entirely different in fish to other animals.

18. On balance it was agreed that the first and third options did not represent acceptable solutions. A form of words broadly in line with the second option proposed could work for all stakeholders, assuming there was a willingness to compromise. In discussion it was suggested that the group could:

- Hold the aspirational and ultimate aim of a reduced reliance on wild-capture.
- Welcome a move towards high-welfare captive-breeding, recognising that, currently, it was associated with welfare challenges and did not represent a panacea, but that techniques were improving with the support of fish vets across the world.
- Call for better regulation of wild-capture.
- Call for enrichment, including in quarantine.
- Call for the development of operational welfare indicators.
- Focus on animal welfare and sustainability.
- Focus on a life worth living rather than equating wild-caught with poor welfare.
- Include suggestions on improvements to the status quo, including a review of transport times based on welfare outcomes, the need for enrichment, a ban on the sale of “tank
busters” to the general public, independent audit of the sector, a move to wild-caught for the purposes of conservation only.

19. It was agreed that wording would be developed and circulated to the working group for discussion and refinement. In the meantime, EWAP would be invited to review the discussions from the working group at their meeting on 19 October.

**Action:** Secretariat to draft revised recommendations for circulation on Glasscubes.

20. Members were thanked for their time and commitment to reviewing the evidence presented.