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STATE OF HAWAII | KA MOKU'ĀINA 'O HAWAI'I
DEPARTMENT OF LAND AND NATURAL RESOURCES
KA 'OIHANA KUMUWAIWAI 'ĀINA

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Testimony of
DAWN N. S. CHANG
Chairperson

Before the House Committee on
CULTURE, ARTS, & INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Wednesday, March 22, 2023
10:00 AM

State Capitol, VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE, Conference Room 309

In consideration of
SENATE BILL 403, SENATE DRAFT 1
RELATING TO CORAL

Senate Bill 403, Senate Draft 1 proposes to repeal the designation of black coral as the official gem of the State. **The Department of Land and Natural Resources (Department) appreciates the intent of this bill and offers the following comments.**

Black corals (order Antipatharia) are a group of deepwater invertebrate organisms that form branching or tree-like colonies. They are vastly different in appearance and ecological function from stony corals (order Scleractinia), which are the shallower-water colonial invertebrate organisms that comprise Hawai'i coral reefs. Nonetheless, both black corals and stony corals are important contributors to biodiversity and habitat in marine ecosystems.

State law currently regulates the take of black coral through a minimum size limit.¹ Over the past five years, less than three Commercial Marine Licensees have reported harvesting black coral in Hawai'i. The Department manages for sustainability of resources and has no evidence that the ongoing marketing and promotion of black coral as the official state gem is adversely impacting the health and sustainability of black coral populations in Hawai'i, much less the health of nearshore coral reef ecosystems. Though it is one action that can be taken to help coral, repealing black coral as the official state gem would contribute negligibly toward the stated goal of preventing further harm to the State's coral reefs and reef ecosystems. Erosion from land, cesspools, marine debris, fishing line, and high numbers of people in the water and especially stepping on the reef, have a far greater impact on the health of Hawai'i's corals. These harms could be mitigated with funding support for ungulate control, fencing, native reforestation,

¹ Hawaii Administrative Rules §13-91-2(b) states: "No person shall take, destroy or possess any black coral with a base diameter of less than 3/4 inches from State marine waters."

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cesspool conversion, natural resources enforcement, and public education. The Department does not take a position on this measure due to lack of evidence that the sustainability of the resource is threatened, but does acknowledge that the Legislature may feel that at this critical time, all actions, big and small, should be taken to protect Hawai'i's reefs.

Mahalo for the opportunity to comment on this measure.

To: Chair Adrian K. Tam, Vice Chair Rose Martinez, and Committee members
Committee on Culture, Arts, & International Affairs

Senate Bill 403 proposes to repeal the designation of black coral as the official gem of the State.

This designation enhances the appeal of items made in Hawaii using black coral, promotes the allure of Hawaii as a special place with unique resources, and supports local companies who sell jewelry made with Hawaiian black coral, and who boost the local economy and provide jobs for the local workforce.

If the intent of this repeal is to protect the resource by discouraging or limiting the fishing of black coral, the intent is misguided. Comments of over harvesting or the threat to the coral reefs and ecosystems are inaccurate.

In Hawaii, black corals are most abundant at depths of from 90 to 300 feet, which is well beyond recreational dive limits. Harvesting is difficult and dangerous. Black coral in Hawaii is managed as a renewable resource. The amount being removed from the ocean is miniscule as compared to the overall volume of the black coral biomass population. Black coral is a relatively fast growing coral, increasing about 2 inches per year. This regrowth rate insures the long-term viability of the population.

In addition, a program of “replanting” the black coral is in process.

According to NOAA, black coral harvested in Hawaii has been a low participation fishery. There are currently no federal permit holders. They have set annual catch limits (ACL’s) and accountability measures (AM’s) since 2012. Within each of those years harvest has remained below the ACL’s. Black coral harvested in state waters is reported monthly by the fisher, and all black coral purchased in the state is reported weekly by the buyer as a dealer report. These reports are submitted to the Division of Aquatic Resources of the Department of Land and Natural Resources. This system enables a verification of what is being harvested and sold.

Please do not repeal the designation of black coral as the official gem of the State.

Thank you for the opportunity provide testimony on this measure.

Steve Brown
Maui Divers of Hawaii