Environmentalists often shudder when they hear about using biological controls of pests because that may mean importing something that turns out to be a pest in its own right. There was welcomed environmental news last week.

A major threat to Maui’s inshore reefs is algae. The leafy, grass-like stuff can smother living reefs created by a thin coating of live animals. West Maui reefs have been under attack by acanthophora for years. It can easily be seen on the reefs just off of Airport Beach Park at the end of Kaanapali.

Algae is also smothering reefs in Kaneohe Bay off Oahu. The algae is so invasive that biologists have resorted to using a giant vacuum cleaner in an attempt to clear the coral. Small-scale experiments have shown native sea urchins love to eat the stuff.

West Maui algae is a different sort but there is a native fish that likes it. Grazing fish such as the manini, also known as the convict tang, will consume Maui’s acanthophora while urchins like Kaneohe’s kappaphycus.

The problem with using these biological controls is that a two-legged predator has reduced the population of both. Urchins are collected by man. The manini, a one-time food fish, is popular with aquarium collectors, who in years past have hit West Maui reefs with a vengeance.

It’s illegal to sell manini but they are easily caught and do well in aquariums. That makes them prey by humans as young as children.

The manini probably would get help from its cousins in controlling algae. Nearly all of the surgeonfishes are grazers. Obviously, there are not enough of the convict tangs to get the job done.

"If people can raise herbivore (planting eating) stocks quite substantially, I believe it will have a big impact," said coral reef ecologist Ivor Williams of the Hawaii Coral Reef Initiative and the state Division of Aquatic Resources. With manini, that shouldn’t be that hard.

In the meantime, the results of the experiments are one more reason to leave Maui’s reef fishes alone. It’s essential to the health of the ocean to keep coral reefs in good condition. Reefs are the nursery of the sea and there’s a chain reaction all the way to the pelagic species so loved by fish eaters.