

# The Big Tank-Buster Debate

By Daphne Layley

A colleague of mine who worked for the Environment Agency had received a call from a member of the public who, whilst walking her dog along the footpath beside the local canal, had seen a very large and strange-looking fish, apparently dying, in the margins at the edge of the bank.

My friend and his assistant located the fish, which was dead by the time they reached it. It measured over 3 feet long and eventual identification confirmed the fish to be an *Oxydoras niger*. This is a member of the dorad family from South America, and a live specimen of that size would command a price of several hundred pounds.

Someone must have bought this fish as a baby, perhaps oblivious to its potential size - they must have fed it well and it just grew and grew. When they finally could not house or cope with it any longer, they callously dumped it into the freezing cold waters of the canal.



*Oxydoras niger*

Photograph © Allan James courtesy of Pier Aquatics

*Oxydoras niger*, although one of the largest members of the Doradidae family, is also one of the most docile dorads, and the fact that such a beautiful and gentle giant should have endured such a horrible death does not bear thinking about.

If the victim had been all warm and cuddly, such as a puppy or a kitten, the person responsible for it would've been guilty of a criminal offence and would be prosecuted for cruelty!

## **So, Who's To Blame?**

It begs several questions:

- Assuming that the owner intentionally purchased that particular fish, was he or she aware of how big it would get at the time of the deal?
- Supposing that the owner bought it from a shop, did the shop's staff warn the customer of its potential size and did they ask if its housing and husbandry requirements could be met?
- If they did make all the right noises, did the customer buy it anyway, lying to the staff and assuring them that he could provide a huge tank and equally huge filtration system for it? If that was the case, the retailer was tricked into believing that the fish was going to a responsible home, and they made the transaction in good faith and could not be blamed.
- Or, was it just a simple cash deal with no questions asked by either side? In that case whilst the customer was at fault, the retailer was also to blame because the lure of a quick profit took priority over the welfare of the fish.
- Or finally, did the customer ask all the right questions in the shop, and was he told "Yes - it will live peacefully forever in a three foot long community tank"? In that case the retailer should have his competence as a pet trader critically scrutinised by the appropriate authority and, if I had my way, his licence would be revoked!

This is just one of many similar instances, but the questions which I have applied to the above scenario could and should be applied to all these cases which we are hearing about. The truthful answers, if only it were possible to get at them, wouldn't make pleasant reading.

## **The Genuine Customers & Fishkeepers?**

There are many experienced fish keepers out there who love and specialise in large fish (very often large catfish) and they have enormous tanks and tropical ponds and equally large filtration systems to match - I do realise how lucky I am to be able to count myself amongst them.

Very often, these big fish become almost members of the family and are spoilt rotten, becoming tame and living many years longer than they probably would in the wild, where they have to run the gauntlet of even larger predators, or harpoon-wielding natives, or the drying out of their natural habitat if the rains are late.

Some of these species, those which attain a maximum length of perhaps eighteen inches to two feet, often display a certain degree of intelligence or at least learn to recognise and respond to their human keepers, especially at feeding time, and they are reasonably easy for the experienced enthusiast to cope with, provided all the criteria necessary for their welfare are met adequately.

These middle-sized "big boys" such as Tinfoil Barbs, Oscars, Jaguar Cichlids etc. to name but a few, can make excellent pets in the hands of experienced fish keepers who have big tanks and filters, and it is not really these species, or their devoted keepers, that this article is aimed at.

Most of us know our limitations, and there are some fish that even the most dedicated and well equipped of us would not dream of trying to keep because it is just not practical and, more importantly, it's not fair on the fish. Of course there are always exceptions, and there is bound to be at least one lottery-winning reader out there who has a tropical pond the size of an Olympic swimming pool!

But for the vast majority of us, some species which are probably best left alone include Giant Pacu, Giraffe catfish, Amazonian Red-tailed catfish, Tiger Shovel-nose catfish and it's hybrids, Asian Goonch catfish, *Pangasius* spp., some Snakeheads, *Arapaima*, Alligator Gars, some giant Cichlids, Giant Gourami, etc. etc...the list goes on and on!

## **The Sad Egocentrics?**

Unfortunately, as in most aspects of life, it is the few who bring disrepute to the majority, and this hobby of ours is no different. There are a few sad souls out there who feel the need to keep very large, dangerous looking animals, fish or reptiles with often exaggeratedly fearsome reputations, just as status symbols to impress their friends and to make them think that they must be very rich, knowledgeable and very clever to possess and handle such beasts.

We all know the sort - we see them on the 10 o'clock news almost every night - if they were dog owners instead, they'd have a couple of Pit Bull Terriers.....

When the friends finally get bored and the novelty wears thin, the poor creature is off-loaded, either by being advertised on a website or handed in to a shop (assuming one can be found that will take it) or offered to a rescue society. If it's not so lucky, it might be released into the local pond or waterway at the dead of night (reference the aforementioned *Oxydoras niger*)!

They are the sort of people whose irresponsible actions spoil things for the rest of us, and they are the sort of people who really shouldn't be allowed to buy these animals.

Not only are they subjecting an innocent creature to a cruel death but, in certain circumstances where the specimen concerned can survive in our winter temperatures, they are risking introducing an alien species which may be detrimental to the environment and could adversely affect an already fragile eco-system and prove a threat to our native fauna.

Some obvious examples are Zander, Wels Catfish, American Signal Crayfish, Grey Squirrels, etc.

## The Retailers?

But how can the genuinely concerned retailer be sure which customers are bona-fide enthusiasts and which ones aren't?

How can they know if the customer is lying through his teeth and over-exaggerating his facilities?

How can they decide whether the prospective customer standing in front of them is an experienced enough fishkeeper to be able to cope with a tank buster?

The vast majority of shops are extremely responsible, and I know of many whose staff will put a potential customer through an intensive barrage of questions about tank size, filters, etc., and even then refuse the sale if they are not satisfied with the answers they are given.

I went recently, incognito, into a branch of our biggest aquatic chain store and pretended to be interested in buying a large Red-Tailed Catfish that was on display. Their company policy is that they don't sell tank busters, but this catfish had been dumped on them by someone who didn't want it any more.

I deliberately asked some pretty dumb and stupid questions about the fish, after which I found myself being politely but comprehensively interrogated by a member of staff who eventually said that they would not consider the sale, until one of the staff had paid me a house-visit to inspect the aquarium and filtration system which I proposed to use.

I was so impressed by this that I contacted the manager and congratulated him and his staff on a job well done!

These shops do this voluntarily and are quite prepared to lose the sale of a fish costing perhaps many hundreds of pounds, for the sake of the fish's welfare and the shop's own reputation. This is a very commendable attitude but, as I said, it is up to the retailer - so far the "vetting" of a potential customer by a shop is not the subject of any legal obligation, only perhaps a moral or ethical one!

There are many shops who have much more thought for the welfare of the fish they sell than they do about laughing all the way to the bank, but we all know a few who don't. What can be done about those retailers who don't give a damn about the fish, as long as a nice wad of crisp notes is waved under their noses - believe me, it happens, I've seen it!

These shops and their owners and staff are most definitely in the minority, and we must not allow the few to spoil it for the rest.

Let's hope some of them are reading this!

## The Wholesalers?

So, I have talked about the rights and wrongs of the customer and also of the retailer but there are other factors to be considered. For instance, what happens when a retailer orders certain fish from the wholesaler's list only to find, upon delivery, that the ordered fish are out of stock and have been substituted with another species?

For example, I know of a shop that recently ordered some small Asian *Mystus* catfish only to find, upon delivery that they had been replaced with another Bagrid, the Giant Indian River Catfish, *Sperata aor*, a voracious predator with a potential length of over six feet.

What would we expect the retailer to do if faced with such a scenario? Well, jump on the telephone and complain to the wholesaler of course, but that does not help the fish, does it?

Assuming that the fish, (however unwanted by the retailer) had been in the bag for many hours during transit and were already very stressed, should they be sent back to the wholesaler and endure another several hours of trauma and perhaps arrive back dead or dying?

Or should the retailer try and make the best of a bad job and put them up for sale in the shop with a warning sticker to customers saying *"When mature, this fish will be six foot long - it is a voracious predator and it will be capable of swallowing cats, dogs and small children. When adult, it will attack your hand or any other object you put in its tank. It will excrete copious amounts of urine and it will regularly produce poo the same size as a pound of sausages. It will need a filtration system with a capacity larger than your family bath and it will require weekly water changes of several hundred gallons at a time" ????!!!!*

Or maybe, on the other hand, the retailer is in a hurry to deal with his shipment and is not familiar with the sometimes tiny visual differences, which possibly only an expert would see, compared to the fish that were originally ordered.

After all, at 3 inches long, they are all little silver-coloured catfish with a habit of disappearing under any bog-wood or other hardware in the tank. What if a customer buys one, thinking it will only get to 4 inches?

Ooops - we might just find ourselves with the same sad scenario that started this article.

## The Suppliers?

In this case, you might be forgiven for saying that the wholesaler should take some blame but, what if the supplier who supplies the wholesaler only lists the available species by common name, as is often the case? We all know that the same common name can be applied to several different species, which is why the correct scientific bi-nomial name - however tongue twisting for some fish keepers - must be used whenever possible.

But that does not help the wholesaler when he is hurriedly scanning the list of available species. In that case, perhaps we might feel that sometimes the suppliers are to blame for not having some sort of standardised naming system, but is that really practical when new species and zonal variations are being discovered all the time?

If there were legislation to restrict the import of certain species, how would it be enforced? Could the relevant authorities employ enough people having the specialist knowledge to enable them to identify and distinguish one little silver fish from another, within a bag of many similar ones, as they are unloaded off the plane? I don't think so - some potential tank-busters would always manage to sneak through in the guise of something smaller, and I've heard of suppliers who just send the same species with a different common name, if and when it suits them!

Even if they could be correctly identified, what would happen to the illegal species in the shipments? - our zoos and public aquariums are already overstocked. Would the confiscated fish have to be killed - after all, they could hardly be re-loaded on to the plane and flown back to their country of origin, could they?

### **Illegal Internet Traders?**

And as if all that wasn't enough, we now have unscrupulous back-street traders who are obtaining and advertising many juvenile species of huge tank-busters which are totally unsuitable to be kept in anything other than zoos or public aquariums.

Some of these species are banned in this country and it is unlawful to keep them without a DEFRA licence, but there is never any mention of that in the adverts.

These traders are not licenced by the relevant authorities, and they deal illegally out of their backyards, garages and lock-ups. They advertise on various different web-sites and the only contact given is a mobile phone number.

**To prove the point, I made several anonymous phone calls to these numbers, pretending to be a prospective customer, and you just wouldn't believe what species I could have delivered by courier to my front door the next day!**

### **With Hindsight!**

There is yet another angle to this - many of the largest and most spectacular species are becoming rare in their natural habitat, some to the point of near extinction. There are many reasons for this - deforestation to make way for roads, crops or grazing land for farm animals, dam building, pollution and the aquarium trade to name but a few. The indigenous peoples have caught and eaten these fish for thousands of years but they only take what is needed for the cooking pot, and they realise the importance of preserving some adult breeding stock. After all, one does not kill the goose that lays the golden egg!

The aquarium trade however, did not seem so concerned with maintaining the status quo and the indiscriminate capture of, for example, sexually mature Amazonian Red Tailed Catfish a few decades ago, resulted in the disappearance (from some areas) of the really large specimens that used to breed there. Eventually the authorities realised their mistakes and many species are now being artificially bred in Europe and the Far East from where today's aquarium specimens come.

Surely this is like "closing the stable door after the horse has bolted". If there had not been such a demand, twenty or thirty years ago, for this species of tank buster (and others like it), perhaps more of those big mature females would still be breeding out there in the Amazon. I must hold my hand up and admit to buying an eighteen inch specimen three decades ago and, thinking back, it was obviously wild caught, but it never occurred to me at the time - I never gave it a thought!

But hindsight is a wonderful thing, so they say, and if my actions in those days, along with many others like me, contributed to the decimation of that magnificent species in the wild, then I can only say how bad I feel about it now and how much I regret it, and how I wish that I could put the clock back.....

Thank goodness, in a way, that they do breed them artificially now - at least the species will not die out completely - but instead of supplying the world's aquarium trade with thousands of 3 inch long baby Red Tailed catfish, (which will doubtless grow up to be the next generation of unwanted tank busters), I would like to see them restocked back into the Amazon from whence we took their predecessors, all those years ago. Maybe there are projects like that already happening - I don't know but I hope so.

## **In Conclusion**

As a life-time devotee of big catfish, I know that size is relative, but there's "BIG" and then there's "TOO BIG". Surely common sense must prevail and the long-term welfare of these beautiful fish must come before the sometimes egotistical desires of hobbyists.

I realise that this is a very emotive subject and there will be strong views from both sides of the divide, but I feel that it had to be said, and it's long overdue.

In conclusion, trying to prevent any more beautiful but unwanted tropical fish from enduring unmentionable suffering and dying a horrible death, either in a freezing river or by any other cruel and inhumane manner, has to be one of our main objectives!

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