Being An Ethical Aquarist

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An Ethical Quandary

To quote Tom Jones, I'd “like to tell you something that happened to me just the other day.” I was in one of our local fish stores looking for laterite to add to one of my tanks. The aisles being narrow, I was stuck behind a member of the store staff and a customer who were discussing fluorescent lighting for the customer’s tank, and over-heard their conversation. From what I was able to gather, he was running four 48” T-8 bulbs over a 75-gallon tank. He had a burnt out bulb with him and was trying to match it to the bulbs the store had in stock. However, the store didn’t have any left and the staff member began to promote Hagen’s new T-5 High Output set-up. Now I’ve seen this new set-up, and I’ll be among the first to say that it is very, very impressive. However, it is just being introduced and is somewhat pricey. I appreciate when knowledgeable staff introduce me to a new technology, but what this staff member then said floored me completely. He told the customer that the T-8 bulbs (and please note that he did not specify Hagen T-8’s, but insinuated that all T-8’s) were being phased out, and that soon he would be unable to buy T-8 bulbs for his aquarium. Therefore, he shouldn’t buy new bulbs, but rather invest in the new T-5 HO system.

Now first off, I had heard nothing about Hagen discontinuing their T-8 fluorescent bulb line (and have since confirmed that the Hagen website does not announce this). Second, regardless of Hagen discontinuing their T-8 bulb or not, there are numerous other alternative suppliers of T-8 bulbs (Sylvania, Philips and General Electric being the big three) that have aquarium specific bulbs, and offer other bulbs that correspond to some of those offered by Hagen. In doing some research into this, I have found that many sources agree that these similar bulbs will do just as good a job as the Hagen ones, and have the added advantage of being less expensive. Therefore, the insinuation by the store staff that all T-8’s are being discontinued was incorrect and misleading.

So here I am, overhearing a conversation that is misleading the customer and basically encouraging him to spend more money when there are viable alternatives to meet his needs. Now I’m in an ethical quandary. Do I approach the gentleman and tell him what I know? Is it wrong to do so in the store, thereby depriving them of business? As I said, an ethical dilemma.

Additional Facts

But as with all ethical dilemmas, there are more facts involved. I had approached the management of this store in the past to advertise in Tank Talk. Having presented the normal information, specifically how our membership is organized, that we represent a lot of expert aquarists in the area, and have a lot of tanks that require equipment and supplies, the manager said to me, “So? Why should I pay you to advertise, when your members are going to come here anyway?” To be honest, I was very put out by this response. We support their store, but they are unwilling to support our membership?

So, I have a pre-existing animosity towards this store, and then I find staff at the same location lying by omission in an attempt to secure a sale of a system that the gentleman did not need. What should I do? Which leads me to the concept of being an ethical aquarist.

Aquarist Ethics

First off, ethics can be something that can be very vague or academic. University courses are offered in a variety of different subjects when it comes to ethics (Basic Ethics, Business Ethics, etc.), but it isn’t these hypothetical studies that I am referring to, but rather how we as aquarists go about our activities within the hobby on a day-to-day basis. In short, treating others with respect and having others treat us in the same way. In doing a bit of basic research, I came to realize that there are a variety of activities that are covered when thinking about these ethics, but to me the two most important are where we buy our stock and what we do with our fish.

Ethics and Conservation

The first concept that can (and should) be considered is that of conservation of fish, and our ability to exist within the boundaries of keeping fish in such a way that we don’t harm the environment, and if possible help the environment. There are numerous individuals involved in our organization that are proactively involved in conservation efforts on a larger scale, but even individuals who keep smaller numbers of fish can affect the native habit of the fish we keep. We can buy fish that are captive bred and we in turn can breed fish ourselves and provide these fish back into the hobby. There are pros and cons involved in how we go about breeding fish. You will find people who believe that we must maintain fish as close to their natural bloodlines as possible, and others who believe that we can cross breed some species to provide new and unique specimens. For instance, rainbow enthusiasts believe that we must keep strains pure, and this in turn leads to some derision of crosses. However, crosses of some other types of fish, such as the blood-red parrotfish, can become quite popular in the hobby. Regardless of the point of view, you will usually find these individuals to be committed to the well being of the fish themselves. By breeding fish in captivity, we lessen the desire and need to remove more fish from their native habits.

Another aspect of breeding fish is our ability to contribute to the restocking of fish that are extinct or endangered in their native habitats. One of our members is actively involved in breeding zebra plecos. This fish is currently endangered in its native habitat and the Brazilian government has placed a ban on exportation. If this fish were to completely disappear in the wild, captive breeding programs may allow the reintroduction of the zebra pleco into its native habitat, and even if it does not
disappear, the captive bred specimens may be used to augment the existing population.

In this case, the ethics of an aquarist revolve around not only what is best for the fish as a species, but also how that fish will interact with the global environment. It may be a small step to protect one species of fish, but enough small steps combine to make one giant stride forward.

**Stock Acquisition**

In my experience, the availability of fish to aquarists can be divided into five sources. They are;

- large aquatic pet stores offering primarily aquatic livestock and equipment,
- large pet centres that feature an aquatic section in addition to sections devoted to other pets,
- large department stores that have a small fish section,
- smaller local pet stores that are either completely or partially devoted to fish, and
- fellow aquarists.

In the first three of these categories, profit appears to be the over-riding concern. Admittedly, while the large pet centres do have management that are very knowledgeable in aquarium keeping, the floor staff often are inexperienced or are in the process of learning the basics. Their overall knowledge tends to be incomplete (although many have advanced knowledge in narrower areas of the hobby), and they often try and answer questions on subjects to which they have little to no knowledge. While they should be commended on trying to provide good customer service, they should be cautioned that they should only provide accurate information.

In addition, fish in these stores are often priced such that they are out of line when compared to other locations. I recently went into one of these types of stores and found Boeseman’s rainbowfish (*Melanotaenia bosemani*) priced at $12.99. I went to Mister Pet and found nicer specimens priced at $7.99. Forget for the moment that Mister Pet offers a discount to DRAS members, and consider instead that when I approached the management at the larger store and mentioned the cheaper price elsewhere, their response was “So? Go there instead.” While it may not be unethical to encourage me to go somewhere else, the fact that their fish were priced so out of line, even after being informed of more reasonable pricing elsewhere, indicates to me that they are more concerned with a profit than with being fair.

Finally, in my opinion large department stores that have a small fish section are the worst of all because the knowledge of the staff is next to non-existent and the quality and conditions of the available fish reflect this. While these stores may seem to be necessary to a trade that has grown in the last decade, and while they may be conveniently located, their focus on profit rather than keeping healthy specimens and being fair to the consumer leads me to suggest considering alternative sources for aquarist needs. (To be fair to these types of stores, it appears that some are beginning to recognize and act on concerns presented to them by aquarists. In February 2007, Reuters reported that Wal-Mart would "stop selling live pet fish at some U.S. stores in response to consumer demand". While presented in language supporting the decision as being due to decreased consumer demand, the article did imply that Wal-Mart was also reacting in part to perceived poor conditions. The article further stated that this was not occurring in all stores, and did not mention what if any effect this decision would have on Canadian Wal-Mart stores.)

The easily accessible alternatives are the smaller local fish stores, smaller local pet stores, and fellow aquarists. The disadvantage of dealing with smaller stores is simply that they cannot provide on-hand the wide range of livestock and supplies that the larger stores can. However, this is offset by their ability to provide accurate knowledge, competitive pricing, and often a surprising selection of unique livestock. Stores such as Menagerie, Mister Pet, and Finatics Aquarium are usually staffed with a smaller number of individuals who tend to have more general and specific knowledge on the specimens they sell. This is even truer when dealing with fellow aquarists who specialize in specific fish. It is this knowledge that leads to ethical behaviour, and while this may be unintentional (after all, from a “good business” standpoint, they are more likely to provide proper advice and excellent service in the assumption that you are more likely to return if you are happy with the product and service) it in the end is ethical.

**Unethical Business**

And now we come back to where I started. I don’t begrudge anyone trying to make a profit, but when the core of the business involves the sale of live animals, it must be acknowledged that there are moral and ethical issues involved. And these ethics cannot be limited to the “live” section of the store, but should encompass all of their dealings with the public. The store in the example mentioned appears to not only be so profit motivated that they are unwilling to support the hobby as represented by our club (and in fact appear to believe that we are so reliant on them that they don’t care how they appear), but they are willing to provide inaccurate information.

**Do Unto Others…**

In the end, I did approach the gentleman who received erroneous advice. I informed him of the existence of Philips “Aquarium and Plant” fluorescent bulbs at Home Depot and informed him that I didn’t believe Hagen T-8’s were being discontinued, but encouraged him to check. Basically what it came down to was that if I had been in his place, I would hope that someone would have stepped forward. I considered that I was being unfair to the store that I was in, but on the balance, that store had not only been unfair to causes I was promoting in the past, but were now being unfair to this person.

(continued on page 21)
Being An Ethical Aquarist
(continued from page 7)

While we may disagree with our fellow hobbyists on certain issues and ways of doing things, I believe that membership in an aquarium society almost always indicates an ethical individual. While there is the opportunity to sell and promote both fish and supplies, it is almost always done in a way that places first and foremost a concern for the fish. Indeed, for the most part the people who make commitments to this hobby do so not out of a desire to become rich or famous, but rather to ensure that we experience this hobby in a way that we all can feel good about.

I have presented a variety of ethical issues that may affect you and your actions as an aquarist, but by no means have I covered every issue that has or can have ethical implications. My intention here was not to tell you how to act or how not to act, or where you should or should not buy fish and supplies. What I hope will result is that you will consider how you interact with this hobby, both with others and with your aquarium, and continue to act in the most ethical manner possible. Remember that at the core of this hobby we are ultimately responsible for the well being of living creatures, and we should always act in their best interest, be it directly or indirectly. Even if others do not, you can chose to deal ethically with others and chose to deal with those who will in turn be ethical with you.