

Cost of Aqua-Cultured vs. Tanked-Raised Fish

Many variables are factored in when pricing aqua-cultured vs. tank-raised fish.

by Jeremy Gosnell

Q. I don't understand why aquacultured or tank-raised fish are more expensive than others. At my local fish store, these fish are much more expensive than the same fish harvested from the wild. Is there any advantage to buying a tank-raised fish? The fish store attendant claims they are hardier than the ones from the wild, although I think he is just trying to sell me more expensive fish. How do I know they are really tank-raised?

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A. To help answer your question I contacted Brian Taimuty, who owns Wet Pets and Friends in McMurray, Pennsylvania. Brian has been involved with saltwater aquarium fish retail for many years, and I figured his insight into this issue would be valuable. According to Brian, the increased cost for aquacultured and tank-raised saltwater fish is because of several variables. First, any aquaculture or fish-raising facility is going to have a great deal of time invested in the setup and care of any system capable of breeding marine fish. As you likely know, marine fish are far more difficult to breed than freshwater fish, so any system implemented to do so on a major scale must be set up and kept in near perfect condition.

Marine fish are not only difficult to breed, but the fry can also be nearly impossible to raise in some circumstances. Considering this, often facilities must contact or even hire educated professionals to help with the development of breeding programs and strategies. Brian also noted many marine fish, while young, are tiny and in some cases nearly invisible to the naked eye, making the prospect of raising them even more daunting. Marine fish breeders and aquaculture specialists go through a great deal of trouble to ensure their charges are given the best proper environment, diet and growing conditions to help guarantee the aquarist gets an outstanding piece of livestock.

Considering these factors, it is easy to see why aquacultured animals cost much more than fully grown adults that are simply netted off the reef floor. The same variables that make raising fish so tough exist, sometimes in greater amounts, in the coral and invertebrate arena as well. Knowing that it can take some corals years to grow a single inch, you can be sure that aquaculture specialists have their hands full.

The advantages, as Brian pointed out, to buying aquacultured fish are numerous. First off, any fish born and raised in captivity has never been subjected to any harsh parasites. Many wild-caught fish enter and leave an aquarium store riddled with parasites or bacterial infections. In addition, it is far less stressful for a fish to be shipped across a county or state rather than all the way from an island in the South Pacific. Some fish breeders supply outlets in their hometowns, so the fish are just transported a few miles from an aquarium to an aquarium store. Also, aquacultured animals are raised from birth on prepared or frozen aquarium fish foods. Aquarists often find tank-raised marine fish will begin accepting fish food within hours of placement in the home aquarium. This is a far different experience from trying to coax a stressed wild-caught fish into accepting fish food.

The other advantage is an ethical one. When we purchase wild-caught aquarium fish we are taking a small part of a large and important global natural resource. Tank-raised fish have been bred, born and raised in aquariums and have no impact on Mother Nature whatsoever.

In my opinion, if an aquarist has the choice between an aquacultured or wild-caught marine fish, the aquacultured specimen is the best choice. The potential benefits far outweigh the additional cost, and you are really becoming a conscientious aquarist when you make that choice. The only downside to aquacultured livestock is not many species of fish are available. To guarantee the fish you are getting are in fact tank-raised, I would ask your fish store who their supplier is and see if there is any way you can contact them. Perhaps the fish are bred locally and you could contact the breeder, maybe even visit their facility in person. Any fish outlet I know to carry tank-raised animals has been happy to share information with me about where they obtained them and at what facility the fish were bred.