

Feeding Fish While on Vacation

What's the best way to feed your fish while you are away on vacation?

By Jeremy Gosnell

Q. I have an aquarium that is a mixed community of freshwater fish. There are several yellow lab cichlids (*Labidochromis caeruleus*), some mixed peacock cichlids and a few other varieties. Overall they are vicious eaters with great appetites. I am going on vacation for about eight days and a friend with no aquarium experience is willing to feed my fish. Should I allow him to do so, or make other arrangements?

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A. I am rarely in favor of leaving an aquarium in the care of someone who is not involved in the hobby. When aquarists with large reef aquarium systems go on vacation I normally advise they have someone check the fish aquarium only to make sure nothing electrical has failed. When I make that suggestion I also add that the aquarist should hide all fish food, supplements, etc., so that they can be sure the fill-in fishkeeper doesn't start to play with the aquarium. You would be surprised at the number of people I've spoken with who have had their aquarium sitter add various things to the aquarium in hopes of making an improvement. In freshwater systems that are unplanted, where a light burning out will not cause massive problems for photosynthetic animals, such as corals, I typically advise the aquarist to do, well, nothing at all.

Fish, being cold-blooded animals, often have slow metabolic rates. Going seven or eight days without fish food is not going to kill or even harm any of the fish you have. I would never advocate not feeding a fish, but not having fish food for eight days will likely have less of an impact as an unfamiliar person dumping excess fish food into the aquarium. People who don't keep aquariums seem to think that if a fish acts hungry it should be fed, and fed more, and then some more, until finally the aquarium water is full of dissolved nutrients from all the excess fish food. Nearly every person I talk to, both salts and freshies, have a horror story about a time they left for vacation and their aquarium was under the care of a well-meaning friend or family member.

A variety of automatic feeders are on the market that advertise an ability to feed fish in the aquarist's absence, though some of them are not reliable. However, there are a few that do work quite well, but they also command a high price. If you do opt for an automatic feeder, I would look for a unit that plugs into the wall and runs on A/C power. Some units use batteries that often need to be replaced and if your power goes out you don't want a battery-operated feeder dumping fish food into an aquarium without a working filter.

Overall, eight days is not a long time to leave a freshwater aquarium without fish food. I would make sure that you do a large volume water change before leaving and that all your filter cartridges and systems are well cleaned and unlikely to fail while you are away. I know several aquarists who have left for vacation only to return to a small flood and a half empty aquarium.

I would tell your friend that while you greatly appreciate his offer to feed your fish, they will be fine for the short while you are on vacation.