

Red-Tailed Catfish in Home Aquariums

Can red-tailed catfish be kept in home aquariums?

By Jeremy Gosnell

Q. The owner of my local fish store (LFS) sold me a red-tailed catfish (*Phractocephalus hemiliopterus*). The fish is growing quickly. I recently learned that the red-tailed catfish could get up to 5 feet long. I have a 225-gallon aquarium. I don't think that will be large enough. My LFS's owner told me this fish shouldn't get larger than 12 inches in a tank the size of mine. What should I do?

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A. Your local fish store's owner is not correct about a red-tailed catfish growing only 12 inches in your aquarium. These South American fish hail from the Amazon and grow to be humongous. Not only do they get extremely large, but they have voracious appetites and swallow anything they can. This includes fish and tank decorations. I have read about red-tailed catfish that swallowed large pieces of rock and quartz. In some cases, the fish perished and in others the animal's owner was able to get the fish to regurgitate the unintended food source. I have been against the sale of red-tailed catfish for a long time. They don't really belong in home aquariums and are best suited for public aquariums that have large Amazonian displays.

Luckily, your situation may not be as dire as you think. Depending on how large your red-tailed catfish is now, he should be able to hang out in a tank as large as yours for a while. There is a fish store not far from me that has a 225-gallon aquarium that has housed an adult red-tailed catfish (about 3 feet, 6 inches long) for several years. If you start looking for a future home now, you just might be able to secure one before the fish gets too large for your aquarium.

I would recommend trying local zoos or aquariums, though I know firsthand that they are usually apprehensive about taking fish from private aquarists. The Pittsburgh Zoo, where I volunteer as a diver, gets many calls per week trying to secure homes for large aquarium livestock. Their policy is zero tolerance and they will not accept any livestock from private aquarists. The risk to a large public establishment is too great if the fish were to be infected with a disease that attacked the aquarium's other inhabitants.

Some aquarists have built large indoor ponds to house red-tailed catfish and you could try to find someone with that setting to take your fish once he gets very large. Returning him to the LFS would be an option, though it is likely he would just end up in the hands of someone else with an aquarium far too small to keep him. I wish you luck in your pursuit finding a home for this big guy. It can be tricky to find housing for large fish. I would be very cautious in accepting advice from the LFS that sold you this species. Unless they are simply unaware of this fish's biology, it is possible that they gave you this information only to make a sale with no forethought about what was best for you or the animal.