

Taking a Vacation? What About the Fish?

There are several methods to feed fish in your absence.

By Lee Newman

"What about the fish?" This is the question any good aquarist contemplates while planning vacations. You might like to take them with you, but that is neither practical, nor recommended. As with many other types of pets, they will have to stay home while you take a break from daily life. So, you are faced with wondering how your fish will do while you're away — either on their own or under the care of someone else.

As you go through a mental list of last-minute items on your way to the airport, the aquarium should not be one of them. Yet, if you expect to return to healthy fish at the end of your vacation, you need to make the necessary preparations before you go. The longer you'll be gone, the further ahead you may need to plan.

One of the most important things to consider before you go is the age of your aquarium setup. Is it relatively new or older and more established? There are exceptions we'll get to later, but generally the older the aquarium and more established its inhabitants, the longer the aquarium can be left without fear of disaster. This is because the fish are likely healthy and accustomed to the aquarium, and all members of the community get along with each other. Well-established aquariums tend to run on "auto-pilot" for longer periods of time when you're not around.

In newer setups, the ecological balance between fish load and aquarium volume as it relates to filter maintenance and water changes may not have been reached yet. The aquarium may be slightly overstocked in terms of waste production or overstocked behaviorally (aggression, territoriality and the like). Having some knowledge and experience with your particular setup makes it easier to predict how it might fare when leaving it alone for a period of time. Leaving an aquarium that is still "finding its balance" is significantly more risky.

Next (and perhaps more obvious) is the length of time you intend to leave the aquarium. If you're only going away for a weekend (or long weekend), depending on your setup, you may not have to do anything at all in preparation. Many experienced fishkeepers routinely leave their charges for two to three days without making any provisions for feeding. Almost any fish can go that long without fish food (more about that later, as well). However, if you're going away for longer, some preparation may be needed.

One of the best things you can do to prepare your aquarium for your time away is to perform a partial water change and clean the filtration system a few days before you go. Cleaning the filtration system makes sense if you consider what could happen if it clogged the day after you left. You don't want to clean the system and leave without having a day or two to make sure everything is functioning as well after maintenance as before.

How Long Can Fish Go Without Eating?

Arguably, the most common question regarding vacations is: How long can fish go without being fed? Most tropical fish are surprising in their ability to fast. Exactly how long is dependent on several factors, such as how large the fish is, how old it is, and whether it is a carnivore or herbivore. Exceptions can be found, but generally, large or older fish can go without fish food longer than small or young fish. It's pretty much a straightforward case of reserves. Large or older fish simply have more body mass and fat reserves they can draw upon. Thus, for example, an adult chocolate cichlid can go significantly longer without fish food than a golden pencilfish.

Also — and I'm generalizing — by their very nature, carnivores tend not to eat every day, or in the wild they endure a season when food resources are more scarce. Herbivores, on the other hand, tend to eat every day. In fact, it's about all they do because of the fish food they eat. Herbivores consume plant matter that is relatively difficult to break down, and therefore a lot of it has to be consumed to get adequate nutrition. In the aquarium, a predominantly carnivorous pike cichlid will tolerate fasting much better than an herbivorous suckermouth catfish of the genus *Ancistrus*.

In order to see how your specific community of fish might do without fish food, you may want to conduct a trial fasting period before going away. Essentially, treat the aquarium as though you were away. Check it on a regular basis, but don't feed the inhabitants or perform any maintenance. As the days tick by, you'll be able to observe how everything holds up.

Almost all tropical fish commonly kept in the home aquarium can easily go at least a few days without being fed. Beyond that, it becomes necessary, or at least prudent, to make arrangements for feeding them while you're away —

depending on the species involved. While a collection of large, healthy cichlids can easily go seven to 10 days without fish food, an aquarium full of baby fish will need to be fed after a day or two. In any case, a few tricks can be used to extend the interval between meals and still ensure the continued health of your fish.

You can extend the interval between meals by turning the temperature down a couple of degrees and putting the aquarium lights on a timer for a shorter-than-normal daytime. A lower temperature will slow the metabolism of the fish, reducing their requirement for fish food. Shortening the length of daylight helps to limit activity that would otherwise increase the need for fish food.

In some cases, such as an aquarium with very young or very small fish, you will have to make some provision for feeding them if you intend to be gone for more than a few days. This situation can pose challenges if the fish have special dietary needs, such as live newly hatched brine shrimp. Many of the commercial vacation feeders are not designed to dispense or be a substitute for live food. If you have very young or small fish, you may need the services of a fish sitter.

Fish Sitters

A well-prepared fish sitter with clear instructions can sometimes mean the difference between enjoying or not enjoying your holiday — at least the "let's check the aquarium" part of returning home. Fish sitters come in a variety of types: a neighbor kid wanting to earn a little extra pocket money, a friend or a relative. There are also people who make a living servicing aquariums in offices, hospitals and schools, and who, for a fee, will look after your aquarium while you're away. Regardless of who looks after your aquarium, how well your aquarium fares in the fish sitter's hands will largely depend on how well you prepare them for the job.

First, make the potential fish sitter clearly aware of the size of the job. Do you have just one aquarium or a fish room filled with numerous aquariums? Also, explain to fish sitters exactly what you want them to do. For example, should the sitter just feed the fish or maybe top off the aquarium from evaporation, as well? Make the fish sitter's job as uncomplicated and easy as possible. Don't require the person to hatch and harvest brine shrimp, or refill your CO2 canister. The more simple the job, the better chance it will be done to your satisfaction.

The first thing to determine is how often you want the fish sitter to tend the aquarium. Unless you have an extensive collection of aquariums filled with baby fish, once every other day or once every three days should suffice. Not feeding every day does two things: It limits the potential for overfeeding and subsequently reduces the amount of waste that will be produced. You'll come home to a cleaner aquarium because of it.

Next, specify what and how much you want fed to each aquarium. At first thought, commercially prepared fish foods, such as flakes or pellets, might seem the easiest. However, unless you actually pre-measure the rations, one person's pinch can be another person's heap.

Perhaps one of the easiest fish foods for a fish sitter to feed is frozen bloodworms, particularly if they come in shallow trays segmented into small squares. Then, it is simply a case of telling the sitter how many squares to feed each time. There is no need to pre-measure anything and no subjective guessing about amounts.

Regardless of the fish food and the quantities, make very sure the sitter understands that if the fish still look hungry after they've had their meal, it is intentional. No matter how hard the fish beg and no matter how cute they look, once they've had their ration, that's it until the next scheduled feeding day.

Write Things Down

Even with the verbal communication that takes place between you and the fish sitter, it is also a good idea to leave a simple written guide of the tasks. There's no need to create a "how-to" manual for the fish sitter. Some basic instructions are a great way to ensure that nothing gets forgotten.

Aside from the particulars of the job, also consider leaving the sitter a number where you can be reached in case of questions or in the event of an emergency. Also, if possible, leave the number of an experienced fishkeeper who may be able to help if need be. If you don't personally know any experienced fishkeepers, leave the name and number of your favorite aquarium store (and let the store's manager know what you're doing to facilitate communication with your fish sitter, should the need arise).

One of the most useful tools to make the fish sitter's job as easy as possible is to put sticky notes on the aquarium that indicate when and how much to feed. This works especially well if you have more than one aquarium that needs tending while you're away. If your aquarium will require the addition of water to make up for loss due to evaporation, leave a

bucket of suitably prepared water beside the aquarium, and include a sticky note about checking the water level.

"Vacation Feeders"

If you can't get a fish sitter, another alternative, assuming the fish will need to be fed while you're away, is to use commercially packaged slow-release feeding blocks. Sometimes called "vacation feeders," these blocks come in a variety of shapes and sizes with varying contents, and are designed to last for specific periods of time. If there's a disadvantage to using feeder blocks, it is the fact that the fish food they contain may not be what your fish are used to eating. However, there's nothing like the cessation of fish food "raining from the sky" and the subsequent hunger pangs to motivate even the most discriminating of fish to investigate the strange-looking, slow-dissolving object sitting on the substrate of the aquarium.

Nevertheless, it's a good idea to expose your fish to the specific feeding block you intend to use sometime before going away. Place one in the aquarium, then stop feeding in the usual way. Over the following few days, you'll be able to see whether the fish are feeding from it.

Most feeding blocks are rated in terms of the number of days they last and come with specific directions regarding the size of the aquarium they are to be used in and number of fish they will feed. Before you purchase a feeding block, read the directions, and get the right one!

Automatic Feeders

Several brands of battery-powered or electric automatic feeders are available for use with the home aquarium. All are designed to hold and dispense dry food items, such as flakes, pellets or freeze-dried foods. There is some range in the options available, but most can be programmed to dispense fish food up to twice a day for up to two weeks.

Essentially, an automatic feeder works by rotating a compartmentalized plate or drum via a timer. The timer mechanism slowly turns the plate or drum, sequentially dropping fish food into the aquarium as each compartment passes over an opening under the plate or drum.

As with any type of equipment, there are good and bad aspects to their use. On the positive side, for a relatively modest investment, one can fully automate the task of feeding the fish while you're away. If, however, for any reason the fish stop eating or the filter stops working, fish food will continue to be dispensed until you return, resulting in polluted water and fish that may suffer as a result.

When You Return Home

Returning home from a vacation is usually bittersweet. It's sad the holiday is over (let's face it — vacations are almost never long enough), but you're often glad to be home. So, how did the fish do? That will depend largely on how well you prepared them for your absence. However, even if you followed all of the suggestions I've made so far, the aquarium may still look a little worse for the experience, and that should prompt you to figure out why.

Vacations are good opportunities to learn something about your aquarium. If you come home to a messy, smelly aquarium, maybe it's because you have too many fish. There's nothing like a vacation to demonstrate that you've been overly enthusiastic in stocking your aquarium.

Or maybe they received too much fish food while you were away. It is far better to underestimate the amount of fish food and frequency of feeding they will need, and arrive home to find your fish hungry but healthy.

Depending on how long you've been away, you may have to schedule a water change and filter cleaning relatively soon after you get back. It's important to get the aquarium back on a regular schedule, in terms of maintenance and feeding, as soon as possible.

With a little planning and preparation, the experience of taking a vacation need not be a life-and-death trial for your fish, or a source of stress for you during a time when you should be relaxing. Despite all my suggestions, the best advice I can offer is to not overstock your aquarium and maintain a regular maintenance schedule: two things that will go a long way toward ensuring you return home to healthy fish.