

A Lifelong Affinity for Chocolate Chip Ice Cream...and Cichlids

Hang on to your armchairs, cichlidophiles! We're "goin' south!"

By Wayne Leibel

As the editor of *Buntbarsche Bulletin*, *The Journal of the American Cichlid Association*, for the past six years, I have been impressed with the increasing volume of submissions concerning cichlids of the Americas. So much so, in fact, that they now outnumber articles devoted to rift lake cichlids.

In part, this is due to a relative decrease in the volume of new and exciting fishes coming out of the African lakes, combined with the constant search on the part of hobbyists for something "new." In this case, what's old is being rediscovered as "new"!

Neotropical cichlids are definitely on the upswing of the popularity curve, and this resurgence in interest has fueled increased commercial importations from new countries and sites. This increased commercial availability, coupled with the trendy "collect-your-own" rage that has spread from Europe to the United States in recent years, has provided the hobby with many new and exciting neotropical cichlids over the past decade.

Alas, availability of new information in the English language about these fish has not kept pace with their importation into this country and is conspicuously lacking relative to the proliferation of texts on rift lake cichlids. What I hope to do in this series of AFI articles is to provide both novice and experienced aquarists alike with a modern introduction to the cichlids of the Americas. I intend to stress the maintenance and captive propagation of these fishes, but to place this information in the context of South (and perhaps later, Central) American biogeography and ecology: how the biotope suggests strategies for aquarium rearing and how, practically speaking, the aquarist can duplicate or approach these conditions.

I will do this in a series of articles that will constitute a catalog of species presented in recognizable and natural groupings (e.g., "acaras," "eartheaters," "pike cichlids" and so on). These twelve or so installments will, if all goes as planned, fill a gap in the current aquaristic literature. Perhaps they will turn on a number of you latent cichlidophiles or convert some bored rift lake aficionados. So, hang on to your armchairs folks, we're "goin' south!"

Why South?

A good question! My own intrigue with fishes of the neotropical Americas is probably best summarized as a historical accident. I have kept fishes for 34 of my 40 years. Along with the original 15-gallon setup, my father gifted me with a now well-worn copy of Axelrod and Vorderwinkler's *Encyclopedia of Tropical Fish*.

I knew from my regular parent-assisted forays to the area fish stores that I must keep cichlids, but really, the only cichlids available at the time (late '50s) were bread-and-butter South and Central American cichlids like firemouths, jack dempseys, convicts — you get the picture. What African Cichlids were available at that time came from West African and consisted of "kribs" of various flavors, Egyptian mouthbrooders, *Tilapia* sp. and, rarely, "Congo" cichlids such as bumpheads (*Steatocranus casuarius*) or "nudiceps" (*Nannochromis parilius*).

Similarly, Axelrod and Vorderwinkler was filled with pictures and stories of principally neotropical cichlids, while the rift lake and Zairean (Congo) fishes were relegated to a short chapter entitled "The Mystery Fishes." The *Encyclopedia* has enjoyed a permanent place in my life, and I have read it regularly (at least once daily) for many years.

What I read over and over again were the entries about the rarely seen South American dwarf cichlids of the genus *Apistogramma* or strange long-snouted eartheaters of the genus *Geophagus*. I memorized the photos of those coveted species and can still see them to this day in my mind's eye. (*Apistogramma agassizi* was my "holy grail" for years!) My adult tastes, as I have stated, were shaped by the fishkeeping era I was born into. Then again, I still wear jeans and my hair long, even in the '90s. Ah, those wonder years!

In the interim, I have found a number of other, more cerebral "reasons" why I favor these fishes. Yes, African rift lake cichlids are some of the more beautiful aquarium fishes available, having colors approaching (and sometimes surpassing) those of marine fishes. Yes, they do offer a variety of breeding challenges from "can't stop 'em" to "impossible," and there are so many species of varying availability that they satisfy at once aesthetic, aquaristic and "collecting" urges. What better than to be the first one to obtain and spawn the incredibly beautiful and rare "Extortachromis paychecki green flash," not to mention the money to be had selling their offspring.

Well folks, they may be beautiful, but they're dumb! Nothing more than aggressive, expensive tetras! And pretentious tetras at that. (Okay, *Cyphotilapia frontosa* is an exception.)

Neotropical cichlids are real cichlids. That is, they are incredibly behavioral — they act like cichlids are supposed to. There is something deliberate as well, something smacking of intelligence behind the way they address themselves to the world.

Have you ever kept a pet peacock (*Aulonocara* sp.)? Is it even possible to do? But I'll bet anyone who's kept an oscar (*Astronotus ocellatus*) has plenty of stories to tell about "Bubba" or "Spike" (some even carry their pictures!).

And this kind of behaviorism is not directly related to size: A 1-inch (2.5-centimeter) brooding *Apistogramma* sp. female can be every bit as behavioral as an oscar. Most African cichlidophiles discover successful spawnings in the form of a sulking female who will no longer eat but nevertheless keeps "chewing" a distended mouthful of something. What kind of challenge is that?

Maybe I'm kinky, but I like to see my fish "do it." I like to see their extended courtship rituals and I like to see them defend and rear their eggs and fry. This experience is not to be missed by any aquarist! It's the essence of "cichlid."

There is another reason for my preoccupation with cichlids of the Americas, and that is my unexplainable fascination with the neotropics — South America specifically. I don't know why, exactly. I think the geological history of the rift lakes is compelling and the accelerated speciation of their fishes, primarily cichlids, which accompanied the formation of the lakes is breathtaking and perhaps unique among animals. I own all of Ad Konings' books and enjoy them! (He even persuaded me to keep Tanganyikan *Xenotilapia*, which I did for all of four weeks before bringing them to auction.)

But I find myself inexorably drawn to the neotropics. I am a fan of exploration literature and find myself specifically fascinated by tales of the Amazon. Perhaps, in a past life, I accompanied Agassiz or Schomburgk on one of their many fish-collecting expeditions in the 1800s. Perhaps I was an Indian watching these idiot gringos shoving fishes too small to be eaten into jars of formalin by the riverbank in between bouts of malaria. Perhaps I was once even a fish. I just don't know. But I seem innately drawn to most things South American, including her fishes.

It could be worse. The fauna of South America remains largely unexplored. It has been estimated that of the 1300 named species of Amazonian fishes, some 10 percent of these are cichlids. This figure represents roughly half of what swims, as yet undiscovered, in the rivers and lakes of South America. While there are an estimated 500+ species of cichlids from Lake Malawi and an additional 150+ species from Lake Tanganyika (out of a worldwide total of 1200 cichlid species), by and large, these lakes have been exhaustively explored.

The possibility of turning up new, undescribed species from South American importers is part of the romance of keeping these fishes. It is also part of what keeps me visiting their establishments on a regular basis in the hopes of "discovering" something new — if not new to science, then at least new to the tropical fish hobby.

For the lazy, armchair explorer, this is just the ticket! I've been to the Peruvian Amazon and to Costa Rica to collect fish myself, and boy is it hard work! There's a certain charm, if not intelligence, to sorting through the fruits of other's labors. Just ask Johannes Heckel, author of many South American cichlid species culled from the collection of Natterer. There are precedents for intellectual parasitism, so why be snobby about it?

Finally, there were few people keeping neotropical cichlids in a serious way when the "African revolution" hit these shores in the late '60s and early '70s. Everybody was keeping "Africans" (not "kribs"), nobody (or maybe just beginners and Leibel) was keeping "American" cichlids.

My allowance was just too small to allow me to experiment in a serious way with (then) "Nyasa" cichlids (i.e., Malawi) like *Melanochromis auratus* or *Pseudotropheus zebra* in its seemingly unending series of morphs. Then again, there was my early fixation brought on by Axelrod and Vorderwinkler.

Excepting a brief interlude with killifish in the late '70s (I was delirious), I have kept neotropical cichlids (and compatible dither fish of similar origin) almost exclusively. What was initially a fraternity of one or very few has, recently, begun to grow exponentially as aquarists, bored by the utter sameness of rift lake cichlids, have rediscovered or discovered for the first time the charm of neotropical cichlids.

I am proud of my long history of apparent lack of aquaristic adventure — of my near mono-maniacal obsession with

neotropical cichlids. I also like chocolate chip ice cream and rarely choose otherwise. That, for better or worse, is the kind of guy I am.

In my many years of keeping neotropical cichlids, I have kept and killed (and more recently, kept and spawned) most of the fishes available in the hobby. I have seen the list of fishes available from the neotropics grow exponentially, and I have scrambled, just like the African aficionados I badmouthed previously, to obtain them and to be the first to breed/distribute and write about them.

In some cases I succeeded in doing just that. I guess the fact that I have been in the game with these fishes for such a long time is credential enough to attempt a series of this scope. I hope my enthusiasm for neotropical cichlids will shine through what information I have collected, and will present itself in the articles to come. I would like to be successful in imparting both information and enthusiasm. I repeat: Hang on to your armchairs folks, we're goin' south!