

## First Saltwater Aquarium

**Push your aquarium hobby's boundaries and take the next step to your first saltwater or reef aquarium.**

*Text and Photos by Ethan Mizer*

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Reef aquaria glitter, glow and shimmer with the vibrant colors of corals.

Reef tank community aquariums take a lot of patience and planning, but the payoff is well worth the effort.

There's a whole world of marine aquarium species to get into. These cleaner shrimp offer entertainment and beauty for marine aquarists.

Strange, difficult-to-keep creatures, such as this orange-spotted filefish (*Oxymonacanthus longirostris*), await those with the tenacity to try salt setups.

There's no doubt about it: aquariums are captivating. How else could our hobby survive — let alone thrive — in this digital age with its multitude of distractions? With so much competition for time, our glass boxes filled with life from the waters have to draw us in. For them, it is a matter of their very survival.

But our aquariums do draw us in, time and time again, despite all the seemingly important distractions we surround ourselves with. What magic do they possess to hold our attention? How is it that the hobby has endured in one form or another for literally thousands of years?

There's more than something simple to what is misleadingly called the aquarium "hobby." For many it's not just a hobby but rather a passion and a commitment.

For freshwater aquarists, the marine side of the hobby is often mysterious, unknown and somewhat intimidating. It shouldn't be, however. While freshwater systems are the mainstay in the aquarium hobby and will always have a very prominent role in defining the hobby, the marine side of the hobby offers whole new adventures for bold aquarists willing to wade into the surf, so to speak. If you haven't given it much thought, or even if you have and decided to wait, you should seriously consider getting into the saltwater hobby.

### Why Wade In?

"But I'm comfortable with my little freshwater setup," you say. "Why should I extend myself? What benefits will I find in the saltwater side of the hobby?" Simply put, there are too many to sum up in a single article. But I'll try. First, the limits on what you can keep in your home aquarium immediately go through the roof when you decide to try saltwater species. Of all the available species of fishes and invertebrates in the hobby, both fresh and salt, the bulk of available species are saltwater.

Where the average freshwater hobbyist is restricted to limited tropical freshwater offerings in most local fish stores, saltwater hobbyists have roughly 10 times the selection of livestock to choose from. And while freshwater setups can be stunning, marine and reef aquaria definitely lend themselves to show-stopping, eye-popping displays that catch everyone's attention.

Unless you're at the very high-end of the freshwater hobby (in which case, you're probably hopelessly addicted to aquariums and you need a new challenge anyway), you probably haven't achieved a display you consider to be as eye-catching as even a less-technical fish-only-with-live-rock marine aquarium. Of course, there are beautiful freshwater setups — I'm a freshwater aquariumkeeper and probably always will be — but marine and especially reef aquaria are just naturally very interesting and captivating. Besides, there isn't any reason you can't keep both.

### Change as a Constant

"I love that my reef aquarium is never the same from day to day. The reefscape grows and changes constantly, and it seems like there is always something new to discover in the tank," says long-time FAMA contributor Steven Bitter. Click image to enlarge

At the high end of the reef hobby, rare corals are prized for their aesthetic beauty and novel growth forms.

Eye-catching corals often draw people into the hobby prematurely. Make sure you know what you're getting into before making a purchase.

Fishes in marine and reef aquaria display all kinds of interesting behaviors, making the living reef display a fascinating source of enjoyment.

By visiting local fish stores, reef shows and aquarium club meetings, you're sure to find corals for your reef aquarium setup. Keep in mind that a reef tank is a commitment to your corals.

Clownfish get a lot of attention in the hobby, and they offer a great opportunity for getting children interested in keeping aquariums.

Display reef aquariums can take whatever form you want; they offer reef aquarists the opportunity to let their imaginations run wild.

Marine and reef aquariumkeeping offers something for nearly everyone. Freshwater hobbyists who have a lot of experience keeping fishes will find a challenge keeping invertebrates such as the numerous corals, anemones, clams and other available creatures. Aquarists who like technical challenges and engineering systems will find a whole new world in the saltwater aquarium hobby. If you like do-it-yourself projects, the marine hobby will offer you tons of opportunities to "get your hands wet," so to speak.

Really, the best part of keeping marine aquaria is that the hobby can be anything you want it to be. If you want an out-of-the-box solution, that's available to you. If you prefer to chart your own course and let your imagination run wild with your setup, you can do that too. You're only limited by your own interest and energy. While some hobbies have clearly defined protocols and established, unquestionable ways of doing things, the marine and reef aquarium hobby is always changing and evolving to incorporate new information, techniques and the introduction of new species.

There isn't any point at which we can stop and say, "This is our hobby. It's totally defined, and we have everything figured out." The marine aquarium hobby defies stable states. It changes as fast as new aquarists enter the hobby. And you can have an impact on the hobby literally from day one.

You'll find a waiting community of very intelligent, passionate people in the marine and reef aquarium hobby. There are numerous trade shows, publications, online forums and local aquarium clubs that cater to the marine and reef hobby.

You'll also find social consciousness and environmentally minded people in the aquarium hobby. The best part about this, however, is that the aquarium hobby is good at empowering people to educate themselves about environmental challenges and make changes in their own lives. I've long argued that aquarists are in a prime position to understand conservation issues because we are so close to the environments we attempt to mirror in our aquaria.

Marine aquariumkeepers are innovators. Very few hobbies put their participants as close to cutting-edge science as the marine aquarium hobby does. Many big-name hobbyists are just scientists who have a passion for marine and reef aquaria. The line is definitely blurred between serious hobbyists and scientists. You must have a little scientist in you to keep marine and reef aquaria, and if you aren't familiar with all of the educational opportunities this aspect of the hobby opens up to you, you'll soon find that your marine aquarium hobby is a great source of enjoyment and education.

Marine photographer Alf Jacob Nilsen says, "My favorite part is the fact that closed aquarium systems enable us to study up close the biology of reef organisms. The reef aquarium is a tool for research and study. I also fancy the many tiny creatures that pop up from live rocks, a most valuable material that is one of the key factors in a stable tropical marine aquarium system. Hunting with a microscope on material from a captive reef containing live rocks is most exciting!"

Some icing on the cake: If you have children, keeping marine aquaria is almost guaranteed to catch their interest and pry them away from the digital media the younger generation seems almost addicted to. You will have to do most of the work, but you'll have the chance to teach your kids things that are way above their grade level. Talk about a leg up. Marine and reef aquaria are practically science labs in miniature. You'll never have to help your kids agonize over what science fair project to start. They'll literally just have to look into the tank for several ready ideas.

There are many other benefits to marine and reef aquaria, but I can't go on naming them forever. Frankly, you'll be able to find more positives than what I've listed just by going into a local fish store and checking out their amazing coral frags. If you've never cruised the coral aisles in your local fish store, trust me, you'll come away a reef aquarist, if only in your desire to keep the beautiful creatures you just saw.

#### Defining Traits of Successful Hobbyists

Being an editor for Freshwater And Marine Aquarium, I'm in a unique position when it comes to understanding this hobby of ours. I'm at the crossroads of every different aspect of aquariumkeeping. I get to hear from freshwater and saltwater aquarists, read tons of articles about the hobby, go to saltwater trade shows and pick the brains of the experts in our hobby.

I keep several aquariums at home, including an 80-gallon planted tank and several smaller setups. But after I attended the Marine Aquarium Conference of North America (MACNA) XXI and Reef-A-Palooza in 2009, I have to say, I've heard the clarion call of the reef aquarium. The pull is strong, and I'm sure many other aquarists have felt it. After seeing all the amazing corals and talking to enthusiastic hobbyists at MACNA and Reef-A-Palooza, I have to say I'm chomping at the bit to try a reef tank.

Luckily, I know better than to jump in without a plan, thanks to my position with FAMA and my correspondence with so many accomplished reef aquarists and "stars" in the hobby. So, I decided to ask a few trusted sources for their guidance and opinions about the ins and outs of starting a reef aquarium. I found the discussions enlightening, and I think many aquarists can benefit from some of the things I learned.

#### Patience

I did an informal survey of a few long-time FAMA contributors to learn what traits and characteristics they think new marine and reef hobbyists should cultivate to be successful in the marine and reefkeeping hobby. After some discussion, I found that the consensus holds patience to be the single most important trait for new reefkeepers to develop. This makes a lot of sense to me, and I've heard this thrown around for a long time in the hobby.

In our discussion, Bob Goemans, FAMA's "Sand Mail" columnist, said, "It is absolutely necessary not to rush into the hobby, as patience is the key to succeeding in this endeavor."

This sentiment is echoed by many in the hobby. "Reef Notes" author Vincent Hargreaves put it this way: "Naturally, the most important pitfall that the reef hobbyist can fall into is a lack of patience. Keeping a reef aquarium is quite easy if you do not rush it! Allow time for your tank to settle down and mature before adding any livestock. Monitor phosphate and nitrate and eliminate it as it occurs. The rest is easy."

When it comes to marine and reef aquaria, new hobbyists have to be patient. And I don't just mean that hobbyists have to be patient when adding new species to their tanks. I mean new hobbyists have to be patient in every aspect of preparing to keep a marine or reef aquarium. Go slow, take small steps and you'll be a better marine aquarist in the end.

#### Planning

This leads into the next characteristic of successful marine- and reefkeepers. Nearly every successful marine and reef setup starts with a coherent plan. If you jump in without considering your goals for your setup and how you are going to accomplish those goals, you are likely condemning yourself to failure before you've begun.

Steven Bitter had this to say: "Don't be intimidated by reef tanks. There has been a stigma for decades that saltwater tanks are so hard to maintain or that they're a lot of work. I think saltwater tanks are, in many respects, easier to keep than freshwater tanks. However, the setups and animals are more expensive, and there are more ecological pressures on the animals that we keep in reef tanks. Because of this, I advise people to really commit to researching and providing good care for each animal in their tank and to not make impulse purchases. Not only does each mistake end up being very costly from a monetary standpoint, but most reef inhabitants are coming from wild reefs, and they deserve our best attempt at providing them with an appropriate habitat."

Alf Jacob Nilsen says, "Read and learn prior to spending money on livestock. We are dealing with living organisms and that entails great responsibility on our part. A theoretical platform is a must!"

You have to do your research before you purchase any animals for your marine setup. This is a case where an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of dead livestock. When you plan properly, you'll avoid costly errors and will be far more likely to succeed in the saltwater aquarium hobby.

#### Fortitude

After you've paid your dues and patiently prepared for your new marine or reef tank, the trait I think is most important to your continued success in the hobby is your willingness to forge ahead through difficult times. Fortitude is the hallmark of the marine aquarist. Without a willingness to persevere through the years, to overcome new challenges and continually explore the boundaries of the hobby, we wouldn't even be able to reliably keep reef aquaria today.

So hang in there, don't give up and keep moving forward with your hobby. If that means you need to start a saltwater setup, then prepare to learn about marine environments and get ready to purchase some marine fishes. If you have to start a reef to grow in the hobby, find some live rock and figure out what corals you can keep.

Don't let your hobby grow stagnant. Find out what excites you in the marine and reef sides of the hobby, what inspires you

to educate yourself, and you'll set yourself up for a transforming experience in the saltwater side of the hobby.

#### 5 Tips to Go Salt

Have patience! Don't jump into getting a saltwater tank without doing your due diligence.

Have a plan. Make sure your new system is planned out in detail, from the tank you intend to purchase to the filtration and lighting that you'll use.

Do your research. Make sure you know the chemistry behind marine and reef aquariumkeeping, and understand what your responsibilities to your tank will be.

Know your fishes and inverts. Make sure you can accommodate the species you want to keep, and study their captive husbandry needs to ensure you can keep them successfully without compromising their health and well-being.

Have realistic expectations. Beyond planning your setup, plan a budget for your system, and try to anticipate potential problems that you might face. Many newbies to marine aquariumkeeping face the same challenges and have the same problems, so check around with local hobbyists or on various Internet forums and in the pages of FAMA to see if others have dealt with similar issues.