

African Cichlids: Homestead Style

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Florida is famous for its fish farming. The stories, yarns, and tall tales of the early days of fish farming are studded with the names of people—like Albert Greenberg and William Sternke—who developed and produced the plain and fancy strains of aquatic pets and plants that have helped to make the aquarium hobby among the best loved in the world. In fact, the entire history of fish farming is captivating and speaks eloquently of individuals rich in pioneer spirit.

It wasn't until a recent visit to Miami that I had an opportunity to "walk the farm" for the first time at Pablo Tepoot's New Life Fish Farm in Homestead, Florida. At New Life, you do not find fancy livebearers, angelfish, or aquatic plants. What you do find, in tremendous diversity and abundance, are some of the most breathtaking African cichlids I have ever seen.

Leaving Miami with my host Marc Weiss (of the discus emporium

The dug ponds are not obvious when one first approaches the farm. The field looks flat. It is a surprise to discover rows upon rows of ponds.

Photo by M. Sweeney

known as World Wide Fish Farm) in the early afternoon, we set out for Homestead. I was delighted by the scenery, all clean, green, and very exotic. I found Marc, though a newcomer to Florida himself, to be an informative and like-minded tour guide who could name the tropical plants, spot a scurrying lizard at 50 paces, and who also insisted on stopping at brush piles to see if there was anything interesting (read: snakes) to disturb. It was almost possible, given the lush emerald fields bordering the highway, to forget that this area of Florida had been so thoroughly devastated by Hurricane Andrew. When I remarked about the abundance of open land, Marc's response was "Yeah, but that used to be a housing development." That still didn't quite drive home the severity of the destruction. It wasn't until I noticed a huge, verdant field with what looked like thousands of 100-foot toothpicks,

and was told that it used to be a pine forest, that I began to appreciate what nature had hurled at this beleaguered piece of real estate.

Arriving at the farm, we turned into a long, curved drive and I wondered where the ponds were. I don't know what I expected them to look like, but there they were, on either side of the drive. Because of the flatness of the land, the ponds are more or less invisible unless you know they are there. On the right side were the

Right: The concrete vats that are used to grow out fish are sometimes covered with nets to deter predatory birds.

Photo by M. Sweeney



Fry are grown to about one inch before being placed in the pond.

Photo by M. Sweeney

real ponds, 60 rectangles dug into the earth. The earth in this case is coral rock, a legacy of the sea. What ideal conditions for those hard-water-loving African cichlids. The dug ponds are approximately 20 feet wide and 40 feet long. They are about 5 feet deep, but the water level fluctuates constantly, and the water was about 3 feet deep at the time. On the left were the cement vats arranged in precise rows like troops ready for parade. With 800 of them, it is quite a parade. The concrete vats vary in size from approximately 5' x 10' to 10' x 10' and are about 3 feet deep. The even paths between the ponds and the vats are mowed grass, and I can imagine that the upkeep of the grounds alone is a massive undertaking. Two huge dogs, a rottweiler and a Rhodesian ridgeback, bounded



Pseudotropheus zebra (red top tangerine).

Photo by P. Tepoot

out to meet us. The rottie was the small one. Pablo shushed the dogs and invited us in for a cup of tea.

Twenty years ago, Pablo and his bride Linda lived in Michigan. Pablo was teaching and on the brink of finishing his dissertation for

his Ph.D. Linda was the mother of a young son and finishing up her master's degree in counseling. They had established a thriving business, importing marine and freshwater fish from around the world. Upon their return from setting up a transshipping station in Hawaii, they found that their valuable shipments of fishes never got picked up from the airport. To their astonishment, when they arrived back at their warehouse, there was not an employee in sight, and it was obvious that no one had been there for some time. They were cleaned out. The pain on Pablo's face as he tells this story is for the fishes; the anger on Linda's face is for the man who stole their future.

The fish population is surprisingly dense in the ponds. There is nothing in the pond but fish and water, no rocks, caves, or other objects that could be interpreted as territories for the fish to squabble over.

Photo by M. Sweeney



They say fish farming gets in your blood, but there must have been some renegade gene because their next move was to Florida. Pablo bought 10 acres of empty field and a trailer. He laughs as he tells how he pulled it off. "First, I made the deal. Then I renegotiated." They had no money.

Linda tells of collecting hermit crabs at the beach to sell while baby Ian played in an inner tube. Pablo sorted fishes at a table in the middle of his empty field.

Pablo started out with African cichlids right away. It was the middle of the 70s, and Lake Malawi was on the lips of every cichlid hobbyist. Pablo used to go to fish farms and buy the "no-sellers." If the hobby thought that *Pseudotropheus aurora* was a junk fish, Pablo bought and bred it. Actually, *aurora*



Photo by P. Tepoot

Male *Nimbochromis linni*.

was one of his favorites. He states that it is a very attractive fish with a bad reputation for aggression, but notes that tank-bred *P. aurora* are much more peaceful than their wild counterparts. He had no trouble selling what others

thought were not profitable fishes. The secret was simply to produce a lot of very high quality fishes. He's straightforward about the fishes he sells. He says to his customers, "You can't pick what species you get. I know what's good this week and that's what I'll send you." When other people tell him he can't do that, he says, "Yes, I can. I make sure everybody is happy."

Pablo's farm grew. He cracks up when he remembers building aquarium stands out of concrete blocks and 2 x 4s. "I just didn't have enough money for the proper building materials. Eventually the whole thing collapsed, and all the aquariums were broken. The truck was a 1962 model, and the only part of it that didn't make any



Male *Paratilapia polleni*. This fish is a Madagascan native that grows quite large. It will lie flat on the bottom under debris when it is frightened.

Photo by P. Tepoot



Photo by P. Tepoot

***Pseudotropheus macrophthalmus*, red hood albino.**

noise was the horn."

These days, the farm is a thriving enterprise. It takes a long, long time to walk from one end of it to the other. Efficiency is important to Pablo. He uses golf carts around the farm because they are faster than walking. (I know that if walking were faster, he would walk.) He is able to run the operation with only two helpers. "I couldn't do that if I weren't careful not to waste time. I don't have time to waste. If a job takes ten hours, I must figure out how to do it in two hours." One example he gives of efficiency is mass production. He will set up 100 females of a given species and strip them of fry all at once. To him, it is a waste of time to set up 20 females of five different species. He figures that if he puts 10,000 fry in a pond and loses even half of them, he still has 5,000 fish to sell. Barring acts of nature like Hurricane Andrew, he never loses half of them.

The fry are kept in eight hundred 40-gallon tanks in the fish house. African cichlids have to be bred in

vats. If they were permitted to breed in the ponds, the babies would all be eaten. The females are stripped *en masse* and the fry are grown out to one-inch size in tanks. Then, all the fry of one species are moved to a pond or vat for grow-out. It is a simple system that works well. To give you an idea of just how many fish are produced at New Life, Pablo uses 75 pounds of fish food a day. He used to make his own food, consisting of baby cereal and shrimp

meal, but after a while it became more efficient simply to buy it.

We talk as we walk the farm. Pablo points out his special fishes: the albino red top *greshakei* that he developed and many beautiful haplochromines. He promises that he will develop six more albino strains before the end of the century. I am amazed that he keeps so many African cichlids, and nowhere do I see a single "territory rock." He says that if they don't have something to fight over, usually they won't fight at all. The lack of property and the crowded conditions keep the fishes peaceful and in clear view. But I think that it's the overwhelming female-to-male ratio that does the trick. Why would the males bother to fight when there are so many more important matters at hand?



***Neolamprologus brichardi*.**

Photo by P. Tepoot

Photo by P. Tepoot

Male *Pseudotropheus greshakei*, called a red top ice blue.

We stop by one of the dug ponds to look at the fish and take some photos. I am standing at the edge of the pond getting ready to take a shot and "WHUMP," that huge Rhodesian ridgeback body slams me from behind. Some trick. Despite Pablo's assurances to the contrary, I am sure that this dog has succeeded in toppling someone into the pond and enjoyed the commotion. Each time I get near a pond, he starts to slide into position for a repeat performance. (I am wise to you now, Brutus; better luck next time.)

We talk late into the evening about fishes and about the hobby. Pablo likens his philosophy to that of the Puritans. To him, it was important to build a farm. "Build a barn for your cow, then you can build your own house." Pablo is big on philosophy. "Quality, integrity, reliability," he tells me again and again, and later calls long distance from Singapore to make sure I don't forget. "Financial reward is secondary. Do a good job and money will come. The most important thing is a job well done. When I was living in a trailer, I didn't complain to anyone because I knew I would be a success." No one can argue with that, but it sure is nice to see the proof, and I saw it that day at Pablo's farm. Cheers, Pablo, to a job well done. 🍷

