

OVAS Chat Event – “Ask an Expert”
African Cichlid Tank
November 8, 2006

The Chat event was moderated by OVAS executive member **PaleoFishGirl**. The member asking the question screen name will be displayed before the question in square brackets. [screen name]. The chat transcript was reformatted by **kyonis**. All answers for member's questions were provided by our “Ask an Expert” guest **DarkDep**.

[PaleoFishGirl]: I'd like to welcome tonight's resident expert, our very own DarkDep/APW, Chris Murray. APW, if you'd like to say a few words about what you want to chat about tonight...

Sure thing. Tonight I'd like to talk about setting up African Cichlid tanks. Specifically about special requirements, general species info, nutrition, etc. For those who have not kept Africans before and are thinking about it, I'd like to help answer any startup Q's you may have.

[PaleoFishGirl]: **tell me about special requirements for water for keeping Africans.**

Africans in general are extremely hardy and adaptable fish in general. Many people keep them with no special water at all. However, They are best kept in water that mimics their natural habitat. African Cichlids most commonly come from Lakes Malawi and Tanganyika (and to a lesser extent, Lake Victoria). These lakes consist of fairly hard, alkaline water.

For Malawi cichlids, ideal parameters are a pH of 7.8-8.6, and for Tanganyikans 8.0 - 9.0. This is the most important attribute. The reason for the wide range is the pH ranges in different areas of the lake.

Also, the water ideally is hard; it contains a large amount of Calcium and Magnesium in the wild (with Tanganyika about twice as hard as Malawi). These details are especially important if you intend to keep wild-caught.

There are several ways to "condition" tap water for an ideal African environment. The easiest and most cost effective way to "Africanize" water is to add Baking Soda (Sodium Bicarbonate) to raise pH, and a combination of Epsom Salt (Magnesium Sulfate) and Coarse Salt (Sodium Chloride) to raise gH.

[SAS]: **how about plants?**

Plants are definitely a challenge in African tanks. For several reasons: Most Africans are Herbivores; so some of them actually eat the plants. Also, Africans like to dig in the substrate, and often uproot plants as part of their digging. Lastly, African water isn't the best for many plant species. However, it can be done with a little patience and planning.

Placing rocks around a plant's roots help to limit digging around the plant. You can use Java Fern, Java Moss, Anubias, and Twisted Val easily enough, they all will work in Hard, Alkaline water. But, in general, if it will irritate you to come home to have to replant your plants, it may not be a good option for you. Cause in the end, they will make it THEIR tank :)

[Julie]: **what are the least aggressive Africans?**

That's a loaded question!

Africans are territorial fish in general, and a "peaceful" African might be considered highly aggressive compared to many tropicals. I would always suggest someone completely new to Africans to keep ones considered Peaceful or Mildly Aggressive at the most. Yellow Labs come to mind as the perfect first African, as they are peaceful and colorful. I would also recommend more peaceful Mbuna such as the various Zebras.

A fantastic resource for investigating the relative aggressiveness of Africans is <http://www.cichlid-forum.com/profiles>. However, Keep in mind these are general guidelines. The aggressiveness of even a peaceful Yellow Lab can be affected by the tank, it's other inhabitants, and individual personalities. Yes, with Africans, some fish are just jerks :)

In African circles, we rate not only the general aggressiveness of the fish, but also it's aggression towards it's own species.

[garnpet]: **For an African beginner, what would be easier a species specific tank or an assorted tank? Or are they about the same depending on the type of fish?**

The short answer is "it totally depends"... I think African beginners should mix; in a properly aquascaped tank, "in general" you'll have a better experience....but again, that answer really totally depends on the species chosen.

[Quatro]: **2 Questions. If I take a filter off a south amer. tank and put it on a African, will it kill the bio filter? other question. is there a dither fish for Africans?**

For Q1: No the Bio-filter will be absolutely fine. No issues there at all.

As for Dithers, ...yes...sort of. If you're keeping smaller Africans (such as Tanganyikan Shell-dwellers), common Danios make an excellent dither fish (I use them myself actually). BUT, except for that circumstance and maybe a small number of others. African tanks really don't do well when other non-African fish are introduced. The general aggressiveness will hagggle most others to death. Especially once the Africans get older :).

[PaleoFishGirl]: **Does the 'size' rule hold the same for Africans as it does for other FW fish (~1 inch per gallon)?**

No! The size rules are completely different.

With Africans you always need to consider aggression; so by conventional logic you might under stock an African tank. However, a particular strategy employed by many is to OVERstock a tank...as an aggressive fish can have its impact reduced by providing more targets. Also, Many African species live in places in the lakes where the fish density reaches 100+ per square meter!

Each tank is different here and it's hard to establish a rule, because the species matters so much. I usually recommend people start with the Inch-per-gallon rule, then as they get more comfortable going up from there is fine as long as the filtration is good. For example: I have kept a 90gallon tank with 23 Africans, totaling far more than 90 inches :)

[garnpet]: **How about filtering recommendations? In general should you over filter your tanks and any preference, HOB or canister?**

Africans are messy eaters and most grow quite big. Keeping them has taught me that the ratings on filters mean absolutely nothing. As with any tank really the Biological filtration is the only thing that matters to keep the fish alive. They produce a lot of waste and good filtration is essential. But, since they make a lot of mess when eating, mechanical also is hard to do well. Ideally, BOTH a HOB and Canister; Canisters are great Bio-filters, but really just can't cut it mechanical-wise. HOB's however do excellent mechanical and nothing beats the surface agitation a HOB provides.

I would recommend anyone setting up an African tank of any decent size employ both, and don't go by the ratings on the boxes. Example: A 55-75 Gallon tank with a Fluval 40x Canister and an Aquaclear 70 is a perfect Combo. Even thou the "ratings" suggest this is enough filtration for about 170 gallons of tank.

[rickster]: **this may have been asked before .in a 180 g tank how many fish can yuo have if they are all average 3 inches**

I'm assuming his Question is the same :). Average 3 inches NOW or Average 3 inches full grown?

[rickster]: **now.**

I'd say 50 would be about the comfortable ceiling for full grown (assuming you're talking species that max out about 5-6"). Unless the species chosen have special requirements or aggression issues.

[sas]: **Fish that are available in LFS are they mostly wild caught and how hardy are they?**

Good Q! Africans are fairly easy to breed. Meaning "Wilds" definitely attract a premium price. The Africans in LFS are MOSTLY domestic. Wild's are usually Specifically marked as such (and, in an LFS, will have a huge price tag) You'd be hard pressed to find a wild African of any less-than common species in an LFS for less that \$100.

The good thing about Domestic Africans is they are SOOOOO much hardier than the Wilds. Keeping Domestic Africans makes treating your water for hardness/pH (in most cases) unnecessary to keep them alive. There are of course some fragile species but LFS's generally don't carry them.

Another very important tip: You will notice in LFS they usually have a tank specifically marked "Assorted Africans". Don't EVER buy fish from that tank. Some Africans are easy to hybridize; also, really, the African fishes are still being identified and named in a lot of cases. So, the fish in the Assorted African tanks are usually hybrids, or fish that someone along the chain was unable to identify. Hybrids often carry health problems with them, and an Un-identified fish hurts the African hobby in general. As long as an LFS can ID them (mistake are often made, though), LFS Africans are great starters. But for the truly beautiful ones, you need to look elsewhere.

[garnpet]: **If I were to setup a species specific tank of say Yellow Labs which I gather are easy to breed. Are they going to overbreed to such an extent the tank will have too many fish or will some sort of equilibrium be established?**

Africans, in general, are Fantastic parents. The mother (and often the father) of a brood will do everything they can to protect the fry. However, the rest of the fish won't think that way. A brood left in the tank with the rest of the fish will usually sustain 80-90%+ losses. Some will survive. And eventually the tank will reach a crowd level which will cease breeding activity. So no, you can't end up with a solid block of fish matter.

[PaleoFishGirl]: **Since you are an African cichlid expert AND a fish food maker... what do you feed your Africans?**

LOL ok, I'll try not to sound biased here :). In general, a mainly herbivorous diet is essential. Except for a single tank I have (which I'll explain), that's the goal. So, the main staple food is my frozen Green Energy formula. Which is fed 4-5 days out of 7. The other two days I've been experimenting with other things; NLS Cichlid Pellets are excellent, and most recently I've been trying out Mysis shrimp which they seem to love. In the wild the "meat" they get are from small crustaceans and insects, so every time I catch a fly, spider, or moth in the house it's a snack too. Never fed a maggot :)

My little guy tanks get a rotating mix of spirulina flakes, Green Energy formula, and NLS Grow. I have one tank that is fed Mysis shrimp 5 days of the week, with my Omni-Pro frozen food the other two days; but that is because it contains *Multipunctatus* catfish and *Protomelas Sylonotus*, which are carnivores in the wild (an unusual trait)

[sas]: **What's your favorite African?**

That's a fun Q! Of all time, of the ones I have personally kept, I would have to say... *Labeotropheus Fuelleborni*, aka the "Marmalade Cat". These guys have a beautiful look that is different for every fish, a unique face (I think they look like muppets!) and it's easy to tell the diff between Males/Females.

Other faves. are: *Synodontis Multipunctatus* (Cuckoo Catfish), *Cynotilapia Afra*, and Star Sapphires. And, of course, just about all the Peacock varieties...you can't go wrong there. But you know what? Some of my "less interesting" Africans have more personality than the pretty ones, so really I love them all.

Closing remarks...

Africans are awesome. I would encourage anyone who likes fish to try them out at least once. There is nothing so satisfying as seeing your fish come to you and interact with you, and then run and hide when someone ELSE comes in the room. They attach to you and recognize you, and that makes them more than "just a fish" to me.

Thanks for the Q's all, glad we could do this.

Darkdep