Fish in an aquarium have long been considered a soothing, even blood-pressure-reducing, part of the office décor in stressful environments, from corporate boardrooms to dentists’ waiting rooms. Known currently as the practice of stocking the offices of Representatives, Senators, and Federal bureaucrats with fish got started. In much the same way that the Mall’s U.S. Botanic Garden harbored parrot palms and philodendrons, when asked, to the nearby offices of Capitol Hill lawmakers, the Bureau of Fisheries (by 1940, the Fish and Wildlife Service, when an agency consolidation shifted it to the Interior Department) stocked and cleaned fish tanks in the halls of Congress.

By 1973, the quaint practice became fodder for investigative reporter Jack Anderson, fresh off the IIT corruption scandal and the burgeoning Watergate revelations, who set his sights on the loan-out of Federal fish, deriding the program as “some 40 fish tanks that the National Aquarium has loaned to senators, representatives and other pampered poobahs (sic) of government.”

William’s unknown—until revealed today—is that Anderson tipped off to the practice by the Fish and Wildlife Service employee concerned that the age-old perk was stripping the National Aquarium of valuable staff and budget that could better be directed toward keeping the aging facility in business—by then 40 years old, and being eclipsed by other, more modern aquariums around the country. It was, in a profession where the word “leak” generally spells catastrophe, a leak of an entirely different sort... the variety that’s practiced inside the Washington Beltway every day.

For guppy lovers at the highest reaches of government, the taxpayers provide pet fish and an aquarist to attend them, the National Aquarium employee concerned that the age-old perk was stripping the National Aquarium of valuable staff and budget that could better be directed toward keeping the aging facility in business—by then 40 years old, and being eclipsed by other, more modern aquariums around the country. It was, in a profession where the word “leak” generally spells catastrophe, a leak of an entirely different sort... the variety that’s practiced inside the Washington Beltway every day.

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fish, the squeamish secretary who summoned help dipping out a
dead angelfish, the bureaucrat who bred a tank of the aquarium’s
African Rift Lake cichlids … then offered to sell them back to
the government.

“There were nearly two full-time positions and a huge truck
allocated to tending the fish tanks on the Hill,” says Gullet.
“This was at a time when the National Aquarium was squeezed
financially. It was an insult, especially when a secretary whined
about a dead guppy in her tank. Talk about your unnecessary
government expense.”

The upshot of the Anderson revelations was that the
fish-tank program was quietly phased out, and Fish and Wildlife
Service employees gave up their daily rounds of fish feedings,
water changes, and aquaria shuffling in posh offices throughout
downtown Washington. In 1981, the National Aquarium tussled
with a nearby new aquarium on Baltimore’s Inner Harbor over
the title “National Aquarium”, both now share the same name,
though neither is managed by the Federal Government.

An attic full of dusty and damaged office-sized fish
tanks were last spotted in the gloomy garret of the government’s
Auditor’s Building – a landmark lump of red bricks left over
from the Victorian era that now houses the U.S. Forest Service,
and where, presumably, the glass artifacts were once counted
and carefully stored away, vestige of a long-ago era when the
Fish and Wildlife Service’s most visible presence in the tense
halls of Congress were tanks full of Bleeding Heart Tetras and
Kissing Gouramis.

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