

The Fish and Wildlife Service You Don't Know

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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.

So perhaps the notion of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service placing tanks of guppies, angelfish, tetras, and cichlids on Capitol Hill was appropriate, from a psychological standpoint, as well as from an enlightened agency public relations perspective.

What better way of emphasizing the importance of fish at budget time than with an aquarium full of sprightly stripers or colorful koi in the office of the right subcommittee chairman, you know?

But the story of how the Fish and Wildlife Service lost its quaint job of tending the tanks of the Beltway's power brokers is a tale of aquatic intrigue torn straight from the Watergate era, involving such diverse players as muckraking columnist Jack Anderson to legendary G-man J. Edgar Hoover.

And the shadowy insider who blew the whistle on this little-known perk of the powerful – call him “Deep Gullet” – recently emerged after nearly four decades of silence to spin his fish tale from that bygone Washington era of lost prerogatives and privileges.

“The aquarium was under budget pressure. It had been on the chopping block,” said Deep Gullet in a recent clandestine interview. “A lovely little facility, a respite for Commerce employees, tourists, area children, who learned about ecosystems and different habitats. It just didn't seem right that a tenth of our budget was spent, essentially, on office decorations – a real waste of taxpayers' money, jeopardizing the experience of hundreds of thousands of visitors.”

The back story begins exactly 100 years earlier, when the U.S. Fish Commission established its National Aquarium in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, in 1873, at what would become America's premier center of fishery and oceanographic research. Moved to Washington in 1878, old sepia-tinted photographs depict a complex of aquaria, holding tanks, and small ponds known as “Babcock Lakes” below the Washington Monument.

With various bureaucratic changes that shuffled the Fish Commission to the Department of Commerce in 1903 and later renamed it the Bureau of Fisheries, the National Aquarium took up residence in the basement of the Commerce building when it was completed in 1932.

Since those dark days of the Great Depression, the National Aquarium – little more than a constrained warren of tanks and exhibits in a non-descript Federal office building – became a “must see” on the Washington summer tourist itinerary. Ask any 7-year-old what they remembered of their family vacation to the Nation's Capital in the 1950s and they'd have told you: Ike, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Lindbergh's *Spirit*

of St. Louis, the Capitol rotunda ... and those bug-eyed, oversized Goldfish outside the Commerce Department cafeteria.

At some point in the National Aquarium's Washington tenure – no one knows exactly when – 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 hauled parlor 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 ITT 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.”

What's unknown – until revealed today – is that Anderson was 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 larger, more modern aquaria 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,” Anderson wrote, going on to profile the daily routine of an aquarium employee who serviced the offices Vice President Spiro Agnew, White House press secretary Ron Ziegler, assorted senators and congressmen, and even the Interior Department's own communications director.

“But of all Washington's famous fish fanciers, none was more devoted than the late FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover, whose bulldog visage and staccato speech were the terror of crooks and Communists. But he was a softie when it came to his pet Goldfish,” Anderson reported in his June 20, 1973, expose. “At the first chill of winter, he would deliver his special Goldfish to the National Aquarium to be looked after during the cold. But as soon as the weather warmed, Hoover's personal bodyguard would appear to pick up the golden dandies. If one of his Goldfish appeared ill, Hoover would order an aide to call the aquarium for a diagnosis.”

Anderson went on to catalogue a litany of real or supposed sins in this fishy fish business – the congressional office that called six times in a single day about its ill Siamese fighting



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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