

NANFA: Its Past and Future

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Christopher Scharpf, our devoted and professional *American Currents* editor, and Jay DeLong, the driving force behind the NANFA web page, pestered me for some time to write a history of NANFA. I knew it would take a lot of time to write, and time is very dear to me at this point in my life. I have a wonderful second family with two children, five and seven, who need more time and energy than this 58-year-old can easily find. Fortunately, I have a wonderful wife who helps keep my life in balance. For the past 40 years I've been running a small multinational sales and marketing company, which I founded. We sell hand tools in over 40 countries, with a sales office in Japan and manufacturing plants in the U.S. and Barbados. The current state of the economy has created a workload that greatly defines my time. In spite of these time constraints, both Chris and Jay are right:

This article is important and the time is right. *It's NANFA's 30th anniversary!*

The main objective of this article is to relate the history of NANFA from the perspective of its founder. I have a second and equally important objective, which is to encourage more involvement from you, the members. You see, NANFA has never been an organization that depends upon one person. Yes, I was very involved, especially during the early years. However, my contributions alone would not have made NANFA what it is today. There have been scores of very dedicated volunteers who devoted countless hours to the association. While there are too many people to mention them all, the ones I do mention have each spent many hundreds of hours defining and improving the association and its mission. They, like me, have done this not just for the sake of NANFA, but because it satisfied a deeper personal need: the need to learn and share what we've learned.

The Early Years: 1972-1976

It has been 30 years since our first *American Currents* was published in the fall of 1972, a simple, folded 8-1/2" x 11" paper format of 26 pages with no volume number (Fig. 2). Vol. 1, No. 1 started in the spring of 1973. It had the same logo developed by John R. Quinn (wildlife artist and later editor of *Tropical Fish Hobbyist*) that is often used today. Vol. 1, No. 1 contained several interesting articles with black and white photos, and a list of 48 NANFA members and officers. The officers included myself as president, H. Ross Brock, Jr. of Georgia as treasurer, Frank Fuqua of California as librarian, Dick Stober of Alabama in charge of the Trading Post, Harry Abrams of Indiana as membership chairman, and eight other positions. These were all self-appointed volunteers as no formal elections or Board had yet been established.

All of these officers worked hard to make the organization a reality. Some deserve special mention as they worked tirelessly for many years in many different capacities. Dick Stober served as president, Board Member, *American Currents* editor for many years (publishing the first color version of NANFA's flagship publication). He also worked hard to develop the Trading Post, and filled in as treasurer when asked. Frank Fuqua worked several years as librarian, and editor of *American Currents* starting in 1974 (Fig. 3). Bob Rosen of New Jersey was another active member. Although Bob was not one of the first officers, he later served as president, vice president, treasurer, and membership chairman, and helped with other projects.

Four issues of a well-organized *American Currents* were published in 1973. In the first one of that year, Ray Katula published his first of many articles. Ray later went on to serve in many positions in the club and ultimately became a

NEW NATIONAL NATIVE FISH SOCIETY.

Because of an increasing interest in the keeping, breeding and understanding of some of the native fishes of North America, a number of aquarium hobbyists are in the process of organizing an association concerned with the subject. Not only would this give members an opportunity to exchange experiences and ideas through a club publication, there would be the opportunity to exchange local fishes with those of other areas whose fish fauna differed from one's own.

It is not inconceivable that related efforts of the association might uncover and point out ecological factors which might be important to the survival of entire species of fishes. Obviously, once extinct, a species is lost, and an interested amateur is often in a position to contribute knowledge equally as valid as that of the professional scientist.

In all the world only North America has darters, little true perches some of which have breeding colors so spectacular that seeing them is their only description. Only North America has (except as introduced species) the sunfishes, equally as beautiful, as challenging and as intelligent as the cichlids. European aquarists prize them highly, although we are slower

to recognize their merits because they are too near for us to see them clearly. The pirate perch, the ictalurid catfishes and many others are our unique co-habitants, and our proposed organization will major in the exposition of their merits.

1-to bring together aquarists who are interested in native species of fish.

2-to encourage increased appreciation of native species through observation, study, research and exchange.

3-to promote the preservation of native species and the restoration and improvement of their natural habitats.

4-to assemble and distribute information about native fish.

5-to promote practical laws for the preservation of native fish in the home aquarium.

If you are interested in joining this unique organization, please forward your name and address in a letter or on a post card to:

Mr. John Bondhus
Monticello, MN 55362

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Fig. 1.

NANFA recruited its first members with this full-page announcement in the August 1972 issue of *Tropical Fish Hobbyist*.

NANFA Fellow for his contributions. Other members that joined before the spring issue was printed included Gerry Corcoran of Mississippi (our only deceased NANFA Fellow) and R. Bruce Gebhardt of Pennsylvania, one of NANFA's most active members.

In the summer of 1973, while we were still under 100 members, we had our first convention. It was held in New Jersey and included a collecting trip to the New Jersey Pine Barrens. Six members participated, including Bob Rosen and John Quinn. It is probably the only thing I did in 1973 that I can still remember! I have many fond memories of that trip.

In 1974, telephone costs were high and most members didn't have enough money to regularly make long-distance telephone calls. Thus we started an active member list and

distributed copies of all useful club correspondence to the Board of Directors and anyone who requested to be involved. It functioned somewhat like the current Board e-mail list, but all the items were typed on single sheets of paper, arranged by topic, photocopied, and mailed to active list participants. While this took a lot of time, it accomplished the important task of keeping members informed of what was happening so choices could be made as a group, not by one individual.

We had our first elections and appointed our first elected Board in 1974. I stepped down and became secretary as Dick Stober assumed the presidency. In 1976, Bob Rosen was elected president, and Dick Stober became treasurer, among other duties.

Years of Growth and Change: 1977-1995

The year 1977 saw Bill Scoggins assume the presidency, and Dick Stober took over *American Currents*. Dick found a local printer who published the magazine with full-color covers of many different species (Fig. 4). To us at the time, color in our publication was exciting, and we were very disappointed when the printer went out of business in 1978. That year was also the first year NANFA members started attending the annual Weekend Winter Workshop, which was a regional convention of aquarists of many areas of interest, including native fishes, held in the Southeast. The NANFA members who attended got together during those meetings for many years in many cities. I attended one of those meetings and remember many lively discussions, some which lasted until 4 a.m. That meeting was held in Macon, Georgia, and they got 1-1/2 inches of snow on the last day of the workshop. The entire city shut down, including the freeway and airport. The convention lasted a day longer than planned because there was no way to get anywhere until the snow melted!

In 1978, Gerry Corcoran started publishing a newsletter, *Lateral Line* (Fig. 6), in addition to *American Currents*. Its purpose was to provide a more timely source of information to members, and it was typically mailed between issues of *American Currents*. It contained a small sampling of articles, the Trading Post, the membership list, and short newsworthy items. Gerry continued *Lateral Line* until the middle of 1982. He not only edited the newsletter, he also printed and mailed it. I think most of this was at his expense. Gerry was one of NANFA's most dedicated members. He wrote many articles for *American Currents*, served in many capacities where needed, and was president in 1979. The Gerald C. Corcoran Education Grant is named in his honor and memory.

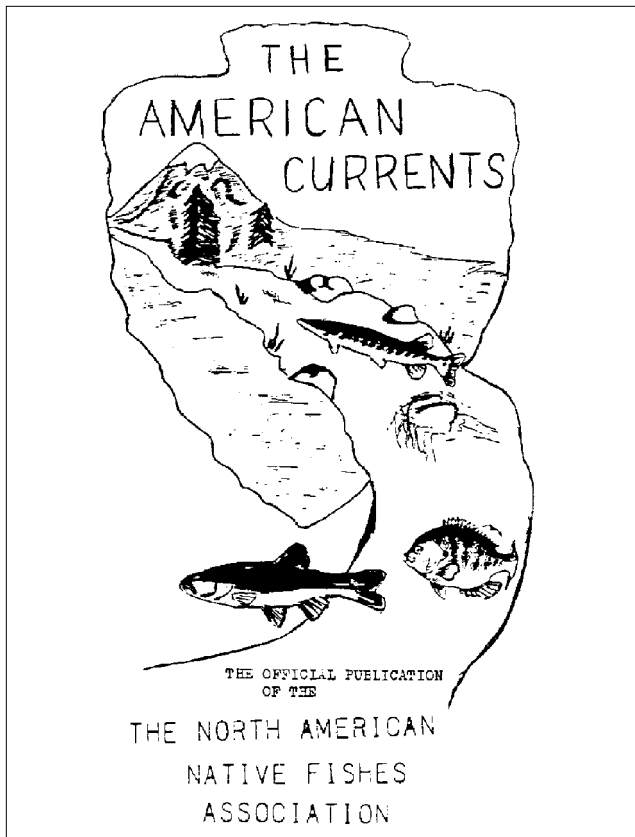


Fig. 2.

Cover of the first *American Currents*, Fall 1972. The issue had no publication date or volume number. The current volume numbering system began with the next issue and continues to this day.

The same year Gerry became president (1979) also saw Bill Scoggins of California take over as editor of *American Currents*. Bill also helped in many other capacities including later serving as president.

Bruce Gebhardt assumed the presidency in 1982. Bruce had been active almost from the beginning and wrote many articles for *American Currents*. John Eccleston became editor of the publication and continued for most of 1983. John must have had a tremendous amount of energy, since he published *American Currents* monthly in 1982 and bimonthly in 1983 (Fig. 7). Bruce Gebhardt then assumed editor duties (Fig. 8), and continued as President until 1988. Dave Hall of California (now Texas), became president from 1988 until 1991, but Bruce continued editing *American Currents* until 1994.

Dave started some initiatives to get more member involvement and suggested starting another newsletter. Not all of his suggestions were accepted, but Dave did get NANFA regional chapters started and many of these have been quite successful. In 1991, Ray Katula, another very active member and frequent contributor to *American Currents*

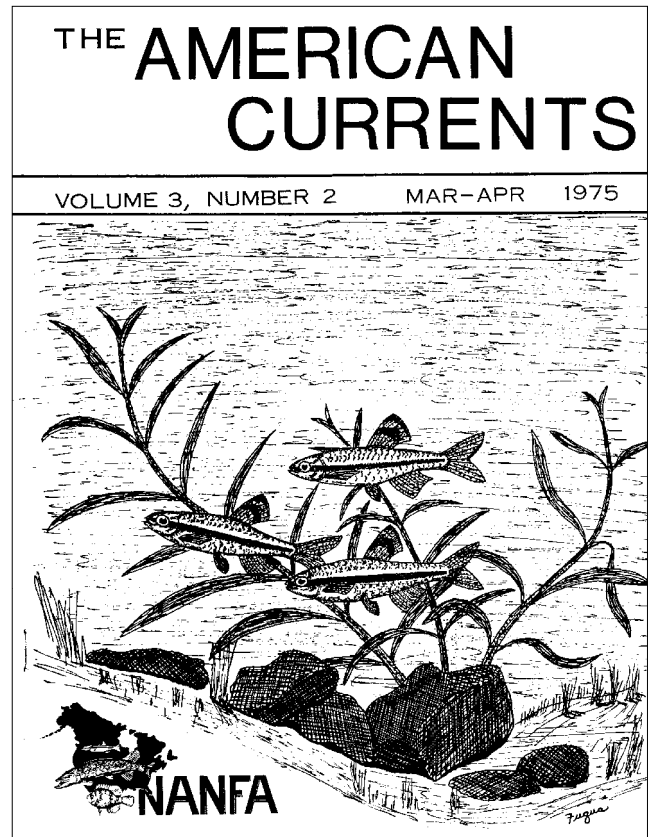


Fig. 3.

A cover from 1975, illustrated by editor Frank Fuqua, showcasing a Dick Stober article on sailfin shiners (*Pteronotropsis hypselopterus*). The "The" in *American Currents* was dropped in 1977.

since the first year, became president until 1994. Ray also worked hard to get more members involved.

In 1995, I renewed my interest in NANFA and again became president. I had two major objectives: to increase member participation, and to get NANFA more involved in endangered fish conservation projects. The Board reestablished the *Lateral Line* newsletter under the name *Darter*, and it was capably edited by Konrad Schmidt for several years. When Konrad became too busy in his work he stepped down and the newsletter was again dropped, but by this time the NANFA webpage was up and running so communication within the club did not suffer.

Building Today's NANFA: 1996 to Present

Robert Rice of Florida assumed the presidency in 1996. Robert did an exceptional job as membership chairman, bringing in many new members. He wrote many articles for *American Currents* and for other publications on the condition that they mention NANFA in the text.

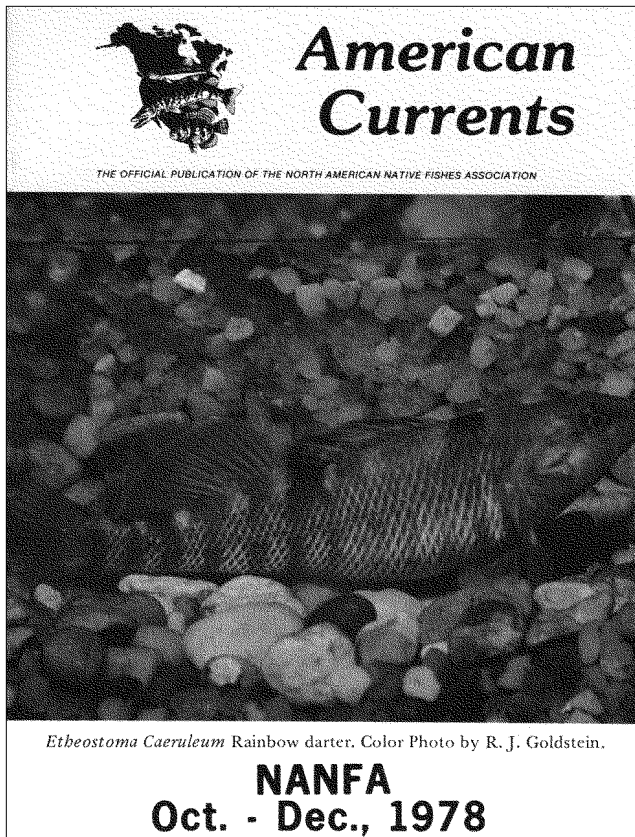


Fig. 4.

One of Dick Stober's color covers from 1978 (shown here, of course, in black-and-white). Dick is one of the founding members of NANFA; read his reminiscences on page 7.

There was a serious power struggle within NANFA between 1995 and 1996, which ended with Bruce Gebhardt leaving the organization. Bruce may have been the most active member NANFA ever had, and the club misses him. Needless to say, NANFA is an organization that gets its strength and value from the contributions of *many* members, not just one, and I truly believe the club is much stronger today. I believe the explosive growth in member services and involvement since that time shows this clearly. Every year since 1996 we have held annual meetings, in part due to a more active membership.

In 1997, Christopher Scharpf became editor of *American Currents* (Fig. 9) and continues to do an excellent job to this day, as you already know. Jay DeLong started the NANFA web page that same year and continues to manage the site. Have you seen it? If you don't have a computer, just go to your local library and check it out at www.nanfa.org. It may be one of the best fish websites in existence, and is certainly the best thing to happen to NANFA in the last decade. Another very useful program is the NANFA e-mail list,

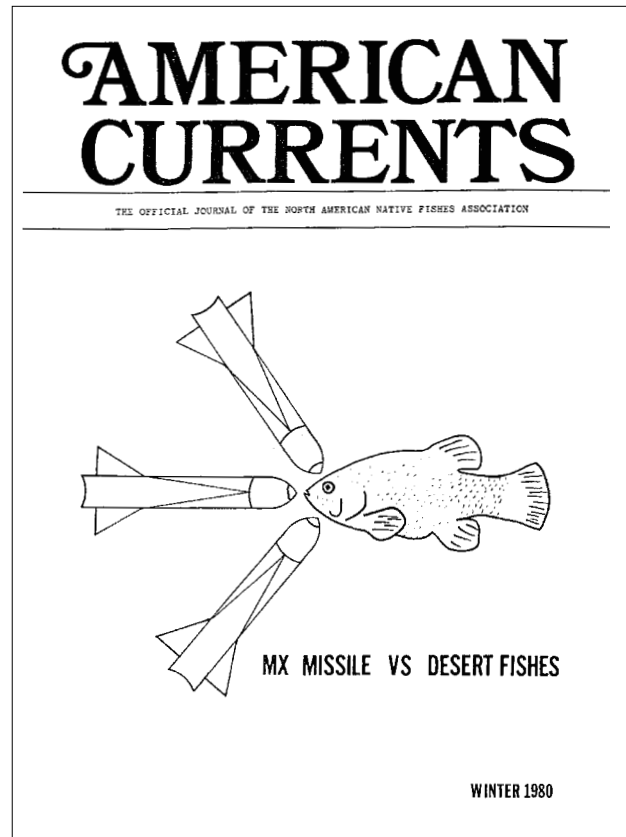


Fig. 5.

An interesting "political" cover from the days when environmentalists were fighting developers and the U.S. military to preserve the aquatic desert ecosystems of the Great Basin.

launched by fellow Oregonians Norman Edelen and Dan Logan. The e-mail list continues to grow with 188 members and 612 posted messages in July 2002 alone!

More recently, NANFA launched two grant programs to fund conservation research and educational outreach projects. Funded by convention profits, donations, and a \$5 dues increase, the two programs have in just two years awarded over \$4700 in grant monies.

People often ask me if I am proud of what NANFA has become, and if I really believed it would ever evolve into the type of organization it is today. I can say with certainty, Yes, I am very proud of NANFA, and of my contribution in getting it started. I worked very hard during those first 10 years, which gives me a tremendous sense of satisfaction. I am especially pleased that NANFA functions just as well, if not better, without my help, and that it continues to provide satisfaction to its members 30 years after it began.

Basically, NANFA met an unfulfilled need (and likely would have been started by someone else had I not done it first). In fact, this need is probably the key reason we get so

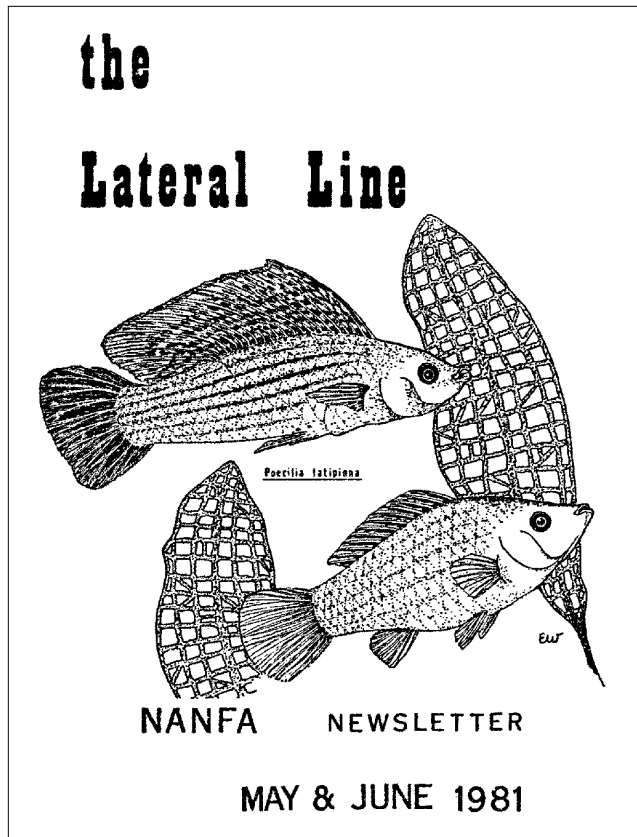


Fig. 6.

American Currents was published only once in 1981, presumably because a fulltime editor was not available. In the meantime, members received bimonthly issues of *Lateral Line*, edited by Gerald Corcoran.

many dedicated volunteers, and why they work so hard to keep it going.

NANFA represents different things to different people. It's a source of information and an opportunity to share expertise. It's a forum to trade fish that are almost impossible to get any other way. It's a way to improve the environment for native fishes. And it's a way to meet other fish experts and people who are equally crazy about fish. I fondly remember the national fish conventions I attended where we stayed up into the wee hours of the morning excitedly talking about a topic almost no one else would want to discuss for more than a few minutes!

For me, this kinship is greater than any I experience in most other areas of my life. It is one of the unexpected gains I really appreciate about NANFA. As I said, someone almost certainly would have established NANFA, but since I was the one who did, I'd like to share some of my reasons for doing so with you. In a way, you could say the following represents a "pre-history" of NANFA, going back 15 or so years before the start of the organization, when I was in my early teens.

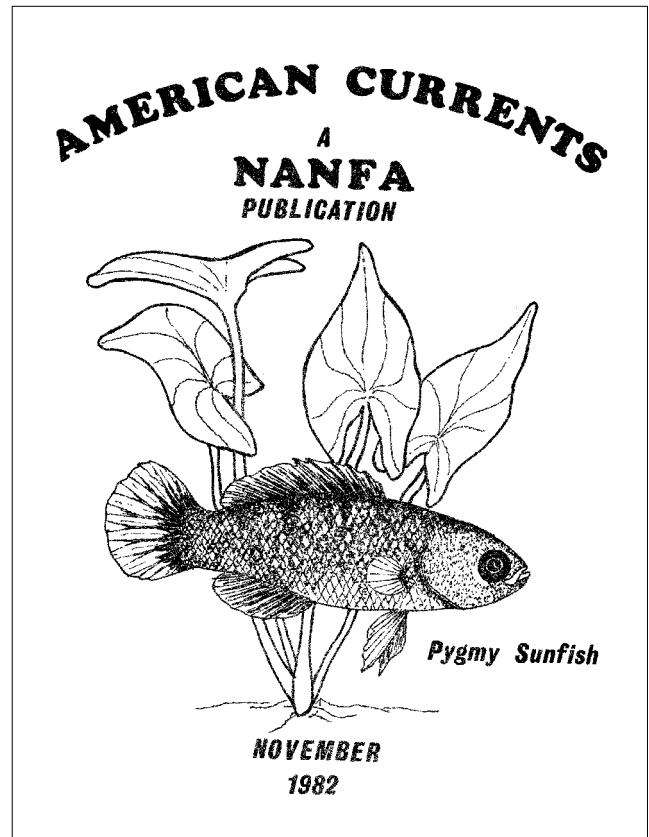


Fig. 7.

John Eccleston became editor in 1982 and produced many fine issues. Many covers from this period, including those for *Lateral Line*, were illustrated by Errol White of Biloxi, Mississippi.

How I Got Into Natives

I became interested in fish when I visited a pet shop with my parents and my Dad bought a five-gallon tank of tropical fish. It was a community tank, and I was truly fascinated by watching nature right in front of my eyes. I bought a small softcover book, *A Guide to Tropical Fish* by N. H. and S. K. Mager. It listed about 200 species, and I thought it covered them all. I read the covers off this book. Then, when I watched one of the guppies in my tank have babies, I was hooked on fish for good.

I bought most of the books that Innes and Axelrod had written at the time, and started reading *Tropical Fish Hobbyist*. I dreamed of owning a fish farm in Florida, and joined a fish club in Minneapolis. I tried raising most of the fish that were within my budget. I never could justify paying over \$3 per fish, which more than 90% of the species cost at that time. Unfortunately, I was too cheap to pay more and too lazy to raise the young fish up to full size in order to sell them back to the pet shop to recoup my investment.

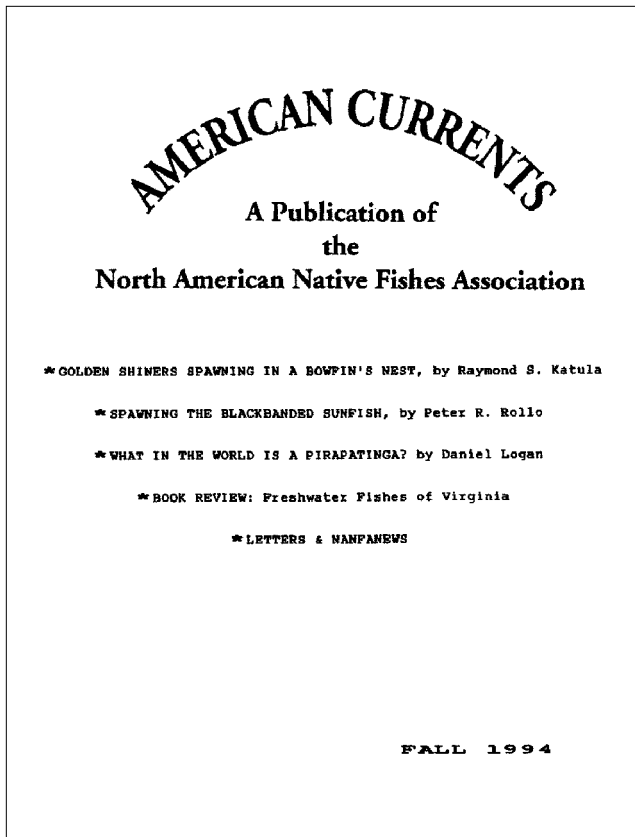


Fig. 8.

Bruce Gebhardt edited *American Currents* from 1984 through 1994. His covers were rarely eye-catching, but the contents were always well edited and full of quality information.

One day, as I was out looking in a small stream that led into a large swamp named Mud Lake, near Orrock, Minnesota, I caught some central mudminnows (*Umbra limi*). I was totally fascinated. They looked like nothing in my books, and I thought I must have discovered a new species. I did a little more research and finally found a book called *Northern Fishes* by Samuel Eddy. It was all about fish from Minnesota. All of a sudden my focus changed! I now found that there were many species right in my own area that were “new” and interesting. I also discovered that the University of Minnesota had a library with hundreds of books on native fishes from around the country. Not only were these fishes different, they were also cheap, challenging, and I could study them without straying far from home. I soon learned there was a lot of scientific literature on Minnesota’s native fishes, and it was all written in English. It even occurred to me that they could be raised on a fish farm in Minnesota.

I still kept tropical fish, but I grew less interested in them. I kept my North American natives in the same tanks as my tropicals, despite pet store warnings that you couldn’t do

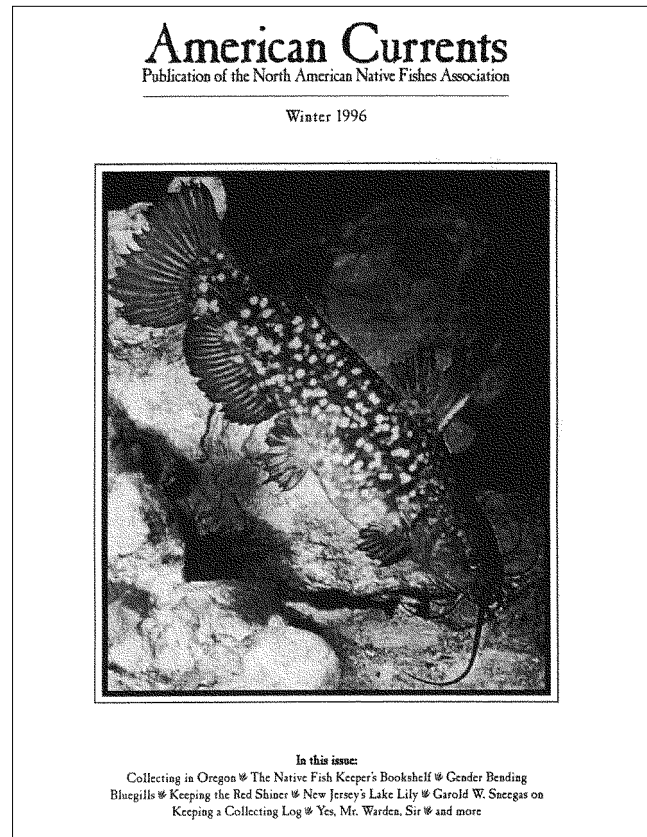


Fig. 9.

Computers and desktop publishing software transformed *American Currents*. This is the first issue designed and edited by Christopher Scharpf. Despite the date, it was actually the first issue of 1997.

that without losing your tropicals. (It’s amazing to me that pet shop employees still say this.) You can keep fish from Africa, South America, Asia, and Australia in the same tank, but North American fish are supposed to be harmful? I believe this kind of misinformation is one reason North American natives are not kept by more hobbyists today.¹

I stayed in my local fish club, but felt more like an outsider all the time. The other members simply couldn’t understand why I raised natives and probably thought I was eccentric. That fish club had a yearly fish show that was held in a local shopping mall. The mall paid for all the prizes and trophies, and the show attracted over 200 tanks in about 20 categories. Tanks up to 200 gallons in size were exhibited, and some were quite impressive. In the native category there were usually only four or five entries, usually five or 10 gallons in size. I always won this category with a 50-gallon community tank.

¹ I often hear that natives are not colorful, and I agree. I also know that the freshwater angelfish (*Pterophyllum scalare*) is not colorful. Neither are most catfishes. In fact, less than half of the tropical fishes most people keep could be described as colorful.

Those were the days, my friend, those were the days.

I don't remember how John Bondhus got in touch with me or I with him. John should be very proud that the national organization which he started 30 years ago is still alive and thriving. Just a handful of folks were there to help John develop our dream. Back in those days we were all volunteers and shared all of the positions. If remember correctly, John was the first president and I volunteered to be the first Trading Post chairman. This was a wonderful opportunity for me to trade with other members throughout the country and in the process make many good friends. There was one young fella who was very active. It seemed that this boy was trying to make his hobby a money making proposition even then. To this day Ray Katula is still doing a great job. Keep it up, "young" man!

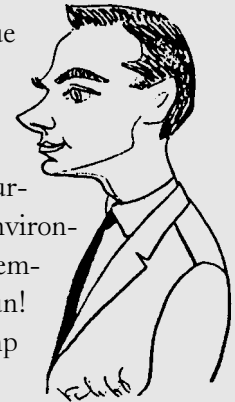
As Trading Post chairman I was high cotton, so to speak, as I fortunately found myself in perhaps the best region of the country as far as native fishes are concerned. At the time I had an unlimited source of live food in the effluent from a nearby meat processing plant. At any time I could have a 2-3 pound ball of tubifex worms rinsing underneath an outside faucet. The EPA shut down the plant, much to my dismay.

I've held most of the staff positions. Perhaps the most demanding was that of *American Currents* editor. I'm sure that Chris Scharpf well understands the responsibilities of this position. I hope the editor no longer has to reach into his own pocket to pay the printer. [*No, he doesn't, thank goodness!—Chris*]

American Currents has evolved from a monthly newsletter to today's publication. Back then we tried to copy both *TFH* and *Aquarium*, which at the time were publishing small booklets, roughly 5" x 9". Later it was my desire to bring color to the publication, with the help of Richard Nall, a fellow NANFA member whose family owned and operated a small print shop across Mobile Bay in Fair Hope, Alabama. To color any more than the cover was too expensive. The first color cover issue premiered April-June 1977. It was in this issue my dear departed friend Ross Brock's article on *Enneacanthus gloriosus*, "Diamonds in the Rough," appeared. Ross had a 15+ shoe size and a heart just as big.

NANFA has always supported conservation, which remains an important cause during these times of booming population growth. We must do our very best to save our environment. Unfortunately, as we emphasize conservation we may have lost touch with our members and the fun of pursuing our hobby for fun's sake. Come on now, let's have some fun! We need more trips like the one led by Steven Ellis last year into the Okefenokee Swamp of Georgia. Attendance was good, we had a great time, and we all went home thinking how good it is to be a member of the North American Natives Fishes Association.

— Dick Stober



CARICATURE OF DICK STOBER THAT OFTEN APPEARED IN *AMERICAN CURRENTS*.

One year the club added a new prize category in which mall visitors were asked to vote on the tank they liked best. I made a special effort that year and set up a very attractive 50-gallon tank with a five-inch northern pike (*Esox lucius*), a four-inch largemouth bass (*Micropterus salmoides*), a couple of two-and-a-half-inch black crappie (*Pomoxis nigromaculatus*), a few pumpkinseed (*Lepomis gibbosus*) and other sunfishes, a small yellow perch (*Perca flavescens*), a black bullhead (*Ictalurus melas*), and a few other fishes. My tank looked nice, but there were at least 15 other 50- to 200-gallon tanks that were equally spectacular featuring fresh- and saltwater fishes from around

the world. My tank not only won, it got almost 50% of the total votes! People were always walking by saying, "Look at that. That looks just like a big northern pike," or a bass, and so on. I think it was this revelation—that I was not the only person who liked native fishes—that inspired me to start NANFA. My tank got more votes because there were (and still are) more fishermen and all-around nature lovers among the general public than tropical fish hobbyists.

I believe that more people would keep native fishes if they were as easy to obtain as their tropical counterparts. Even today, I think the market for native fishes remains untapped

and could be developed. Personally, I would like this to happen. There are some who say the environmental risks are higher if you raise natives. I agree that native fishes are more likely to cause havoc if released into the wrong habitat. At the same time, it is the knowledge and appreciation for natives I gained while keeping them in aquaria that have turned me into an environmentalist. I believe the educational value of keeping natives more than offsets the risk of an occasional introduction. (Besides, most of the introductions that have occurred were done deliberately by misguided people to control weeds, control other fish, or to provide sportfishing. Future introductions like these would be harder to accomplish if more people better understood the environmental consequences.)

An appreciation for native fishes also can help protect those that are endangered. Some species, like the Alabama sturgeon (*Scaphirhynchus suttkusi*), have difficulty making it to the endangered species list because of political pressure from business coalitions. If we ever want to balance the scales between endangered species and financial interests, the general public has to care enough to do something about it. Native fish hobbyists can play a key role in spreading awareness and fostering a climate of care.

Sharing, Learning, Conserving

My interests changed. A few decades ago, during a period when I was less focused on business, I started reading and studying more about native fishes, and keeping them less. I realized that accumulating all the information available on a specific fish was almost impossible. I started to write an annotated bibliography of the pike family, Esocidae, and hoped that others would do the same with other species. This project proved too daunting, and I later abandoned it as my interest in business returned. In the process, though, I accumulated 5000 references on the pike family on subjects ranging from disease to distribution to aquaculture. I estimated that there were another 5000 references, not counting game fish articles, I still had not accumulated. And that's for a small family (only five species) back in the 1980s! I estimate there must be twice as many references today. The job is simply too big for one person, even working fulltime. My bibliography was never published and remains unfinished.

While the job of writing about all fish species is an enormous task, it may be possible to complete a large part of it. Through the Internet, many people can share their work and the work can be divvied up as long as there are volunteers to do it. Information on a website does not have to be complete.

It is a place to continuously add and refine information as interested members share their knowledge. Even color photos and videos are within the budget of a website. In some ways NANFA's website, developed by Jay DeLong, is doing this already. What we need is someone to develop a species-by-species outline broken down into categories such as breeding and culture information, distribution data, habitat data, etc. Someone would also need to assign passwords to individual contributors wishing to write in their own particular area(s) of interest. We have many members who are clearly the world's foremost experts on certain fishes, and a large percentage of us can contribute specific useful information on something we have observed. Think of the value of going to a resource like this where most of what is currently known would be organized and searchable electronically in minutes instead of days, weeks, or months. Anyone interested in taking on this challenge?

Another area I am interested in is endangered species conservation. I began to organize a conservation program within NANFA, but shortly thereafter started a new family, and had to stop before I had hardly begun. NANFA has many members doing a lot of work in this area, usually as part of their work in other organizations, but I think a lot could be gained by enlisting NANFA's help.

One of the unique things I like about NANFA is the breakdown of its members. Typically, they fall into either governmental, academic, or amateur hobbyist categories. I think the cross fertilization among these groups that NANFA engenders increases the amount of information shared. Most of our professional members agree they can learn something from amateurs, and vice versa.

NANFA's Future

The future of NANFA looks exceptionally bright. My personal workload and family are limiting me, but it really doesn't matter. NANFA is in the hands of many exceptional people. The last 10 years or so have seen dramatic growth for the club, not necessarily in the number of members, but in a more important area: accomplishing the mission statement goals. I am sure a lot of people never apply for membership, but does that really matter? It costs almost nothing for someone to visit our website, learn from it, and apply its principles.

I just reread NANFA's mission statement, composed in 1998. I agree with it totally and cannot think of a single improvement. I couldn't have turned the club over to a more capable team. 