

Putting Native Fishes in Their Best Light

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by

Robert S. Carillio

Many devotees of the flashier tropical aquarium fish can't get excited about the more subdued tones of some of our native species. I'll admit, it takes a practiced eye to appreciate the subtle shadings of gray and brown common to many native fish.

But a lack of appreciation for the "earth tones" of these fish is only part of the problem. Ignorance, too, is a contributing factor. Many tropical fishkeepers just don't know about the more colorful natives, like sunfish and darters. But the heart of the problem is how we've been displaying natives all along: we simply fail to put them in their best light.

Many of us have collected fish from the wild and marveled at their striking colors. A pumpkinseed sunfish, taken off a hook and held up for a minute, is a shimmering array of metallic blue and iridescent yellow, truly one of the world's most beautiful fish. And many of us, too, have rushed home with our prizes, only to discover that fish that looked so defined in pattern and color outside, "drabbed up" in the aquarium.

Of course, this has happened to me as well. True, there is much more to appreciate about native fish than color alone. But I create native aquarium displays aimed at public awareness and appreciation. And when dealing with the public, color is the only quality that attracts attention. From the start, I knew I had to find a way to bring the natural brilliance of native fishes indoors.

I started from square one, with the typical aquarium bulbs that come with a standard strip light or canopy fixture. These, I soon concluded, fell far short of the mark, bathing the tank in a ghastly pink cast.

During my collecting trips, I noticed that fish looked best during a partly sunny/partly cloudy day. "How could I simulate these conditions?" I wondered at the time.

I needed a bulb that produced a natural spectrum of light. I found an inexpensive one, GE Daylight, available in 24", 36", and 48". I can get them from a GE warehouse near where I live, at a discount, for between two and five dollars. (In stores, these and similar bulbs may run for up to \$16.)

I started with the 48" bulb, for a 55 gallon aquarium, but when I turned on the light, I was again disappointed: the tank looked a tad bit yellowish. I tried moving the light around, and finally settled on placing it near the middle of the aquarium. This was an improvement, but the yellow cast still remained.

I needed something else. I took a trip to the local hardware store, and searched through the different colors of spray paints. (That's right, spray paint!)

I chose one in a dark blue—far more appropriate than either red, green, or yellow. After removing the bulbs from the fixtures, I took them outside and sprayed them with an even, "not-too-dark, not-too-light" coat of paint. (I call it misting.) I let them dry for about 30 minutes and then reinstalled them in the light fixtures.

Then came the moment of truth. I turned the lights on and was very impressed with the results. The combination of natural spectrum light, combined with the faint misting of blue spray paint, created a filtered or semi-cloudy, "deep lake" appearance. Very relaxing to the eyes.

But the best results were when I looked at the fish. The subdued lighting brought out their beautiful emerald

greens, iridescent blues, copper hues and shining oranges. The black crappies were particularly attractive, with their black mottled splotches contrasting sharply against a metallic gray-green background. The central longear sunfish, too, were a brilliant mix of blues and orange.

But still, something was missing. Perhaps a single light source from the top of the tank wasn't enough. I went back to the hardware store, and this time searched for a fluorescent desktop lamp with an adjustable arm.

This particular lamp had an 18-inch bulb, which I promptly misted with blue spray paint. After the paint had dried, I put the lamp on the floor, directed the bulb to face the aquarium, but angled the light off to the side, to eliminate the glare. Again, the results were stunning, and I saw colors that I never knew these fish possessed.

In addition to the spray-painted fluorescents, I also hit upon a much more low tech solution for bringing out the color of native fishes. Most that I've kept show off

beautifully in a room with plenty of indirect sunlight. (Direct sunlight may promote algae growth and turn aquarium water dark green.) And as with tropicals, natives are at their best when fed a healthy diet and given the benefit of regular water changes. Rainbow darters, in particular, do best at about 68°F, when given clean, well-oxygenated water and not subject to over crowding. Although rainbows will look fine under a standard aquarium bulb, a light misting of the bulb with blue spray paint provides an interesting effect.

These lighting ideas have helped my displays immensely. Again and again, people who view the tanks I've set up are surprised to learn that the fish they see are swimming in waters right in their own back yards.

Finally, don't just take my word for it. After you try what I've described, go on and try out your own lighting ideas. Use your imagination. Experiment. You never know what you might find out.