

TRADING DACES--The Strategy of Native-Fish Trading
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Some AC Trading Post advertisers dropped their ads recently because members kept calling about advertisers' haves without satisfying their wants. Then this writer received four or five inquiries in response to his Trading Post ad, from members with nothing to trade. There seemed to be a need for an article to explain what trading's about, especially since we've taken in a lot of new members recently.

Most TP advertisers regard the title literally--it's for trading! Some advertisers have things to sell, but most only want to trade. Some want particular species or types of fish to satisfy personal curiosity or to launch a research project; others just want to see something new.

There are a few classes of people who undeniably have it tough in coming up with any trade currency--members in some western states hostile to collecting, or members who are older, younger, femaler (some collecting can be physically demanding as well as messy), or physically handicapped; the rest of us should generously take such factors into consideration. But 90% of members have ready access to native fish.

Collecting's fun, a major part of the appeal of natives; but it takes time and work in sometimes tough conditions and can cost money. When I visit the streams and swamps, I am beset by an incredible variety of biting insects. Up to my thighs in stinking mud, lifesblood drained by leeches, tearing a \$10 net, learning that all my plastic bags have identical holes in them, striding through saw grass with bare legs, slipping on aforesaid mud and profanely baptizing myself, then answering some kid who asks, "What are you doing?", spending \$20 for gas, \$5 for food, and \$25 for beer. Then when I get home, my answering machine holds a message from a member from near where I just collected saying he wants the species I caught there and will pay \$2 apiece for them.

Just packing up an order is a real pain, without the pleasure of being outdoors. It may take 90 minutes to pack a box, then 30 minutes to mail it. Customers of my regular work would be billed a lot of money for two hours of my working time; It's not worth packing a box of fish just to pretend to be a nice guy.

It somehow frosts me to go through all the work of collecting and packing and shipping to somebody who only called and agreed to write a check, even if he offered me a profit. My deep-down feeling is that the trade should compensate not only for expenses, but for effort. Did the other guy collect as I did, or did he at least breed some fish? It's pretty easy to write a check. It's not enough! That's only my theoretical position; I don't really impose an effort test on would-be trading partners. But it occurs to me!

My main reason for trading is to obtain new species otherwise inaccessible. If I sell fish, then I've lost my stock in trade-- there'll be nothing to send to somebody from a distant region who offers something neat if I've already sold fish for a soon-spent pittance.

Newcomers should also be aware that many members have philosophical reservations about selling native fish. Moreover, a sale may change the legal status of a transaction in the eyes of one or another bureaucracy. It could cause trouble down the line.

How to Get Fish to Trade

None of this blather solves the problem of someone who legitimately has trouble collecting tradeable species. There are some possibilities. If you have trouble finding fish in the wild, then you've got to be shrewd about how to start out in the game, how to amass a tradeable package, then how to build a substantial collection through trade.

First, watch your fish-dealer's tanks. At any given moment, most large aquarium-fish stores will have some kind of native fish. The most common intentional natives would include gar, American Flagfish (you buy them small, then raise them up to a size where they're rare and magnificent, then you can trade them), Red Shiners, Sailfin Mollies, sleeper gobies; occasionally Blackbanded Sunfish show up in the trade, as well as *Gambusia* (normally low trade value, but black-mottled ones have some), Bowfins (look like snakeheads), Golden-ear Killifish, or oddments. Many natives come through in the aquarium trade as accidents; you have to check each tank of tropicals.

Similarly, check what bait dealers have, if anglers in your state can use minnows. Golden Shiners and Fathead Minnows have little trade appeal (except breeding adult Fatheads), but you may find oddball shiners or killies in the mix.

Aquatic plants, especially pond plants like water hyacinths, sometimes harbor fish eggs. Check the pools or tanks for fry; make an understanding with a fish- or garden-store owner to always check. (Make sure the store-owner knows of your interest in natives generally.) Plants from Florida have been known to contain eggs of Bluefin Killies, *Leptolucania ommata*, and *Funduli* including Golden-ears and *F. cingulatus*.

A member ought to know other local NANFA members. They will frequently help out just to have someone who'll share their affliction. Further, it is wise to have some contacts in the local aquarium society. Other specialty aquarium groups such as the American Killifish Association may serve the same function. Things turn up if you make your interests known.

A useful technique to obtain natives is triangulation. Any reader of the sports pages should understand this. If you want

fish A but the owner wants only B's, not your C's, see if you can trade your C's for somebody else's B's, then swap the B's for the A's. Sometimes plants or a herp can turn the deal.

Only two Rainbow Darters, both males, and you live in Connecticut? You hunt around for somebody in Kentucky who has or can get two females, trade some *Fundulus heteroclitus* for them, then you have an irresistible two-pair unit that you can trade to anybody in the east, deep south, or west.

And then there's always "future considerations"; the problem is, at least one party may forget an obligation.

All this may seem complicated, and triangulating involves an extra step; but if you want to do business, you have to provide what people want. I do it all the time. Why should I sympathize with somebody who won't make an intermediate trade to get what I want? It probably sometimes offends trading partners if they hear I swapped their priceless whatever's for something else by return mail, but hey, that prospect is what made their stuff appealing in the first place.

There are certain fish in nearly every region that always have trade value. If you can obtain some of them--even if you have no personal interest in them--you will be in the catfish seat. Blackbanded and Bluespotted Sunfish (Bandeds are just as neat); *Elassoma*; Bluefin Killies and Swamp Killies (*Leptolucania ommata*); and most killies, which have a ready-made group of aquaristic admirers; Orangespotted and Longear Sunfish--these are consistently the most wanted; Dollar and Flier Sunfish are welcomed. Many darters are sought--new enthusiasts inevitably and justifiably want Rainbows, Orangethroats, Gilts, and others; more experienced enthusiasts go loopy over less known (and quite ugly) species.

This makes the point that what's common and commonplace to you, no matter where you live, is "exotic" and often desirable to somebody two states away. It's just a matter of finding the somebody who would be interested. TP is a starting point, but accounts for only a minority of the trading that goes on; most sophisticated NANFA traders develop their own network. Sometimes you have a hunch about somebody who might be helpful; it's up to you to exploit that potential.

Finally, at least once a year, everyone ought to be able to go somewhere that has fish. Catch a few extra pairs and come home ready to trade.

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