

# What NANFA Means to Me

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and Michael Thennet

by Rob Carillio

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My first aquarium was one for which I assumed all maintenance responsibilities from my older brother. I was only 10 years old. My interest in fishkeeping grew after visiting many aquarium stores and reading a lot of publications. Associating with people who had the same interest, including my Dad, has provided me with many fond memories over the years.

I was raised in a family that was plagued with what I call “the grass is greener” syndrome. Our hometown didn’t seem very thrilling, so they thought that everything they aspired for in life would be better somewhere else. For a while I was also like that—everything from shopping to nature seemed to be better if we went someplace else. This seems to be the kind of attitude many aquarists take when viewing local flora and fauna. “It’s better if it’s from place *x*.” Well, being raised around this mentality and after traveling quite extensively, I’ve come to the conclusion that we can accomplish wonderful things if we start locally. I really discovered this when I observed local forests and their ecosystems not more than a stone’s throw from home. Yes, this is what sparked the fire of an interest that would many years later lead me into the world of native fish appreciation.

By the time I was 17, I raised my first local sunfish, which I collected after a wonderful nature walk. By the time I was 22 I got a job in one of Ohio’s aquarium stores where I shared my interest with many customers. (Management did not like that!) At age 25, while also working in my father’s business and going to school, I started my own aquarium maintenance service. This was fun and lucrative. Seeing that

by now I knew how under-appreciated many native species were, I began creating native fish displays in public places. This was a hit from restaurants to lobbies. I found that when people could actually see a display, they became more interested in it. This was about the time when I became interested in NANFA by reading an article by then-president Bruce Gephardt. I noticed after visiting many nature centers around the state that most places did not set up their native aquariums to capture and captivate an audience. Those displays looked cheesy, and the fish looked dull and sick. Because of this problem, I approached several places to “help them do it right.” I put our fish in the spotlight they deserved, thus creating better appreciation and reception from viewers. It made them appreciate that our local rivers, lakes and streams were not born with tires and rusting cans on the bottom. Several publications featured the job I was doing as cover stories.

I guess none of this really says what NANFA means. Well, on the contrary, it does! It was through NANFA that I found folks who weren’t just interested in using fish for interior decorating reasons. These folks were also conservationists who appreciated not only the fish, but the entire ecosystem supporting them. I have learned that many of our local waters are in trouble and in dire need of local interest that has been missing. I have learned that native fish appreciation is a graduation beyond the realm of normal fishkeeping. NANFA gives members an opportunity to become advocates for our local aquatic habitats and to get out and appreciate the beauty that surrounds them. I truly believe that degradation of local natural habitat of any type stems from lack of education. For example, how often do we hear of endangered rain forests? The average person knows more about endangered rain forests than about endangered native fishes in his or her local river. Why? What gets more attention in the media? Rain

forests! NANFA presents a wonderful opportunity to create local interest for habitats surrounding us. This is achieved through education. “Education through appreciation” leads to conservation of and pride in our local waters. Best of all, NANFA has members from all walks of life—from scientists to folks who just love watching natives swim by in aquariums. They make NANFA a voice for many underwater creatures that have no voice. That is why NANFA is very important!

by Jeffrey A. Fullerton

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**F**ishkeeping has been a life long hobby of mine. And my first attempt at keeping natives probably began with “Splasher and Tucker,” two banded killifish that were leftover baitfish from a family fishing trip when I was still in preschool. Before long, I was wading through creeks in pursuit of all manner of aquatic life to keep in those old metal frame tanks we used to have years ago. By my teenage years, I had graduated to a kiddie pool in the backyard in which I kept a variety of minnows, sunfish and catfish, along with painted turtles.

Shortly thereafter, I moved on to liner ponds made from cheap polyethylene and eventually worked my way up to what is now regarded as the best stuff—EDPM synthetic rubber. I also widened my taste in fishes and began seeking many of the species I had only read about, but had always wanted. Once I attained the mobility that adult life affords, I began making those dreams a reality.

I did spend a little time away from my ponds and tanks during my years of military service, but that also served a productive purpose: I got out into the greater world and broadened my horizons. Opportunities for travel. New locations and contacts. Plus I explored the growing body of knowledge pertaining to fishkeeping in general and keeping natives in particular. I read about NANFA and bought Tom Baugh’s book *A Net Full of Natives* while stationed in California. I was keeping blackbanded sunfishes at the time and my interest in getting other unusual and hard-to-obtain species was growing. But I procrastinated. I got distracted by other things.

I finally joined NANFA and my only regret about it is that I did not do it sooner. Most people, myself included, often join in order to make contacts so they can trade with other hobbyists who have access to different species of fish which they can catch locally. But they often end up making new friends and even traveling great distances to visit them.

It’s one thing to have someone send you northern redbelly dace from Wisconsin. But it’s altogether different to take a scenic road trip out there (quite an adventure in itself), meet that same guy, and go collecting with him . . .

Or to spend a day with NANFA members from Virginia catching satinfin shiner and mountain redbelly dace somewhere west of Richmond . . .

Or to get together with Mark Binkley in Columbus, Ohio, tour his spectacular fish room, travel out to a weekend retreat at a pristine glacial pothole lake in the wilds of Indiana, teeming with starhead topminnows, blackchin shiners, lake chubsuckers, not to mention conventional angling opportunities for monstrous bass, bowfin and panfish.

And let me not forget expeditions with Mike Quispe to remote reaches of the Florida panhandle collecting spectacular killies and dollar sunfish in a lily-choked roadside slough.

Among past years’ greats was the 1998 NANFA Annual Meeting in Chattanooga. I greatly appreciated the behind-the-scenes tour of the Tennessee Aquarium and the great food we had at restaurants nearby. I also appreciated the hospitality and hard work of Casper Cox, who set the whole thing up and arranged field trips to some of the local rivers and streams. The rugged ride to the Conasauga was like a trip to some remote part of the globe, and many of the fishes found there were about as spectacular as what you could buy from your local pet shop. It was the first time I had ever seen rainbow shiner and southern studfish. And the longear sunfishes were as awesome as any cichlid you might hope to catch in the rivers of México or Central America.

NANFA has grown quite a bit since I started communicating with other members on the e-mail list. This medium has given the organization a new lease on life, as it has opened up more opportunities for members to communicate. Just today I was forwarded another potential contact for my growing regional chapter.

So far, our chapter has done mostly trips with members from other regions. It would be nice to get some activities going in our own region as well. The mountain streams of western Pennsylvania have a decent amount to offer, as well as the possibilities for daytrips to the wetlands of the glaciated lake plain near Erie, which harbors some unusual species. Other possibilities include trips to fish culture facilities like Zetts Fish farm in Drifting, Pa., and facilities operated by the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission.

But I keep focusing on fish too much. What I am really trying to say is that NANFA is also about people—people getting together to share their knowledge about collecting

and keeping fish, the treatment of diseases and parasites, the culture of live foods, catching bugs, and more. NANFA offers us a chance to get our feet wet, have fun with other members, and make lots of friends and memories to last a lifetime.

That's what NANFA means to me.

by Michael Thennet

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**I** have been an avid tropical freshwater and marine aquarist for over 10 years. I never thought I'd find an interest in native American fishes, but that's what all tropical fish hobbyists think.

Several years ago, after reading an article by Robert Rice on collecting and keeping the central longear sunfish, a native American fish that easily rivals and surpasses tropical discus in coloration, I wrote to Mr. Rice, who at the time was president of NANFA. He provided me with the NANFA information I needed. At that point I was just interested in keeping native fishes. When I received my first issue of *American Currents* I read an article written by Bob Bock concerning local stream collecting in Maryland just 30 minutes from where I lived in Virginia. This was just too close to home to pass up. Now I was interested in collecting native fish.

A few weeks later, after a thorough investigation of Virginia's collecting laws, I purchased all the necessary legal

equipment—4' x 10' seine, dipnet, fishing license—and recruited a few tropical fish hobbyist friends to collect at a local stream flowing into the Potomac River. We caught spotfin shiners, blacknose dace, greenside darters and mottled sculpins. I was hooked (no pun intended). Since then my aquariums have only supported native American fishes.

NANFA is a national organization which brings together people from all over North America and other parts of the world to share knowledge and experiences collecting, maintaining, studying and even breeding North American native fishes. One of the best things about NANFA is the people I have met and the friendships which have developed via e-mails and collecting trips.

Members of NANFA receive its quarterly publication *American Currents*, which includes "first-hand experience" articles written by NANFA members themselves. You don't have to be an expert to get involved. The publication acts as a practical guide containing information on state collecting regulations, collecting methods, maintenance, health, and breeding of native fishes.

In addition, depending on the region, members may receive notices which notify them of upcoming activities such as local field trips, meetings, and restoration and conservation projects concerning native fish. Your access to these activities is limited only by a phone call or an e-mail to your regional representative. The level of involvement is up you. The sky—or should I say the ocean?—is the limit. 🐟

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