



## A Visit to Coast Tropicals

# Is Fishkeeping Ethical?

# Alcolapia alcalicus



To Cull or not to Cull; That is the Question! Caring for C.A.R.E.S.

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Fish Tales Submission Guidelines

#### Articles:

Please submit all articles in electronic form. We can accept most popular software formats and fonts. Email to herpchat@yahoo.com. Photos and graphics are encouraged with your articles! Please remember to include the photo/graphic credits. Graphics and photo files may be submitted in any format, however uncompressed TIFF, JPEG or vector format is preferred, at the highest resolution/file size possible. If you need help with graphics files or your file is too large to email, please contact me for alternative submission info.

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Next deadline..... March 1st 2019

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# Federation of Texas Aquarium Societies President's Message

President's Message December 31st, 2018

As we close the door on 2018, I would like to give everyone a short retrospect on FOTAS over the past year. First of all, I would like to thank the executive team for allowing the smooth business dealings of our organization to occur. I believe we are going into the sixth consecutive term for our exec's which consists of myself serving as president, Kyle Osterholt as Vice President, Lisa Hufstetler as Secretary, and Chris Lewis as Treasurer. A huge thank you to Marvin England, Dr. Keith Arnold and Charles Jones who have been there for advice or anything else needed. I want to thank Clay Trachtman for stepping up and resurrecting a BAP program that all FOTAS clubs can participate in. Clay has also taken over the website from Gerald. Thank you, Gerald, for your years of work with this and for Clay relieving him of this (Gerald has paid his tenure!) Austin Prestridge has taken on securing a design for the CARES medal which we will award to any club putting on an exhibition. This is to be given to the best CARES fish in the show. I am excited about this award, FOTAS Facebook page. Dr. Arnold reviewed applicants and suggested the winner for the education award. This is a 500.00 award derived from the Dr. Keith Arnold and Braz Walker funds. We awarded two prizes in 2018. I would like to thank Gerald Griffin who works diligently to produce our publication "Fish Tales". Our magazine has won national acclaim and is one of the most well-done periodicals, professional or otherwise, out there.

The annual Federation of Texas Aquarium Societies convention was held outside San Antonio this past year and hosted jointly by the Oklahoma Aquarium Association and the Hill Country Cichlid Club. We all had a fantastic time with great speakers, a wonderful show, swap meet and a productive board meeting. It was a very informal affair and lots of fun. Next year the South East Louisiana Aquarium Society will be hosting FOTAS in Baton Rouge LA. Make your plans now because this will be quite an affair! SELAS is putting on a big show with renown speakers. This is more along the line of what one would expect at a national convention. Don't miss it. The year after, 2020, the Greater Austin Aquarium Association will host FOTAS. I couldn't be happier of the resurgence in activity within our organization!

I want to welcome to the FOTAS family, our newest members. The North West Arkansas Aquarium Society. NWAAS holds their monthly meetings in Rogers Arkansas. They have an active Facebook presence and their website is http://NWAAS.com. The Greater Austin Aquarium Society has been an active club for several years and are now an official member of FOTAS. What better way to welcome them, than to award them host of the 2020 annual FOTAS convention!

Our family of Aquarium clubs HCC-Houston Cichlid Club HAS-Houston Aquarium Society SAAPC-San Antonio Aquatic Plant Club NWAAS-North West Arkansas Aquarium Society OKAA-Oklahoma Aquarium Association

TCA-Texas Cichlid Association SELAS-South East Louisiana Aquarium Society GAAS-Greater Austin Aquarium Society HCCC-Hill Country Cichlid Club OBBA-Oklahoma Betta Breeders Association

Our organization in on strong financial footing thanks to the years of diligent work by long time treasurer, Dr. Arnold. We still have one bit of business that has been a bit of a hassle, however Dr. Arnold and Chris are working to get this taken care of quickly. Financials are available to any FOTAS member and are included in the 2018 annual meeting minutes. One can contact any board member for a copy.

I'm certain that I am leaving some vital information out or not recognizing the hard work of other individuals who keep FOTAS growing and for that I apologize. It is a pleasure working with everyone in our organization and I am looking forward to what 2019 will bring us.

See you in Baton Rouge!

Greg



FOTAS CARES Report December 31, 2018

There hasn't been much activity in the FOTAS CARES program for this report. I will be sending out requests for updates this week to active members.

Please note the following: There are many participants that I suspect might believe they are active FOTAS CARES members. This may not be the case. On the last update, if you did not reply to my email, I have marked your entries as inactive. I will not pester and chase you around for an update. You will be marked inactive if I have not heard from you within a week. The good news is that in order for your entries to be reinstated, all you have to do is contact me so we can update you and mark you as such. If you think you are participating in the FOTAS CARES program and do not get an email from me this week requesting an update, you are not active. I will not contact you any further but you may contact me at gasteeves@gmail.com. We had 86 CARES entries and now are down to under 50. I suspect many of those are still maintaining their CARES colonies only couldn't be bothered to respond to my email.

If you are new to the CARES program and would like to participate (any member of any FOTAS club can register their CARES fish under FOTAS as their club), you can submit your species at https://caresforfish.org/. If you require assistance maneuvering the website or with anything else CARES related, feel free to contact me.

I would like to recognize two FOTAS members from the Greater Austin Aquarium Society who have become a major part of CARES. Riccardo Camera is now the editor of the CARES Exchange working closely with Ethan Grantham to grow this availability list and publication. Thank you both. We are very proud of the job you are doing.

Don't know if you have a CARES species? Check out the constantly updated CARES Priority list at https://caresforfish.org/?page\_id=40. I love seeing FOTAS involvement with CARES and leading the way for further conservation projects.

We can't save them all, but we can all save one.

Greg

# **To Cull or not to Cull; That is the Question**

## Article by Gerald Griffin Photo by Jackie Hutcherson

hen it comes to Bettas fewer topics are more controversial than culling fry.

The reasons for culling should be obvious. When people engage in breeding Bettas they can be left with hundreds or even thousands of Bettas. Very few individuals have the capability of caring for that many Bettas. Now if we take this further and look at breeders that want to show Bettas, they need to raise their Bettas in individual containers. When I ask new breeders "How many Bettas are you willing to care for?" the realization hits. How many containers can I manage? How many Bettas can I actually care for? The reality is that that number is often lower than one might think it is. With experience breeders adjust and determine that number for themselves if they do not burn out.

#### Reasons to Cull

Genetic Defects – This should be obvious, however what are the genetic defects one would cull for? This can be problematic as some of the Bettas that one could be culled would be a genetic defect that someone else might want to incorporate into their lines. One example would be Double-Tail. Although it is a duplication gene, if a breeder was looking for developing a strain like Half-Moon then the original Double-Tail might not have been with us. Other defects are those with deformed spines which some breeders try to pass off as "Balloon" Bettas. This has been done in other types of fish such as Platys, Mollies and even Blue Rams. Most fish keepers find these forms detestable however there is a small group of casual fish keepers who like these forms. These mutations occasionally show up in Bettas on Aqua-Bid. While detested by the majority of IBC Members there is a small sub-group that also like them. So, what are the mutations you would cull for? Typically, things such as missing fins, swim bladder issues, scale issues, or whatever criteria you might want to use. As a rule, if it affects the health of the fish it is good to cull. However where would Dumbo (Elephant Ear) or Rose-Tail come in? My recommendation is that if you do end up with one of those mutations, instead of culling it, work with it yourself or pass it off to another breeder to work with them so that those genes are not lost.

Strain Purity – Here is another aspect of Betta Breeding, developing lines for showing or creating something new. An example would be that you might be breeding for Red Bettas and everything that is not a Red Betta is culled. While most breeders do not breed this way there are some that do because they are perfecting color. Occasionally something unique might pop out of these lines. Other examples would be breeding for Half-Moon and any Betta that doesn't measure up ends up culled. This is something the Fish Tales - 5 individual breeder will have to consider when developing lines.

Growth Rate – This is one of the major culling reasons as several breeders want fast growing Bettas so that they can get to show size in the fastest amount of time. While this is true for some breeders others have discovered that sometimes your best show fish are the slow growers. Here are some things to consider. Many species of fish have differential growth rates and Anabantoids have some of the widest ranges of growth rates of any

other types of fish groups. If you have ever raised a group of Bettas, you have probably noticed that some reach full size in a few months or less and others at four months look like they are six weeks old. There has been speculation that as fish grow, they secrete growth inhibiter compounds that slow the growth of competing fish. When the spawn is raised with massive water changes the growth differential is less extreme however there is still some. This could be due to aggression during feeding where the smaller fish are getting less food or expending more energy on avoiding aggression by the larger fish. Another way to help even out the growth is to remove the rapidly growing fish to jars early to allow the smaller ones time to develop faster. Jarring the smaller fish also helps with the growth rate. Also, worth noting is that growth rate is also differential based on body verses fins. Bettas kept in large jars grow their bodies bigger and those grown in smaller containers grow their fins faster. This is also worth noting if you are working on show Bettas. To optimize growth some breeders first jar in larger containers like a gallon in size and as the body grows to optimal size, move them into smaller jars to let the fins grow out.

Health Issues – This is one that is argued a lot. When a Betta comes down with an ailment, is it worth trying to cure or is it easier to cull? Part of that answer is based upon the value of the Betta to your program, other answers might be based on your perceptions on "Betta Ethics". There are some who believe all Bettas must be cured. This is again up to the individual.

When it comes to culling there are several perceptions people have when it comes to culling. I put up a sur-Fish Tales - 6



vey as to these perceptions and the results of that survey is as follows:





#### QUESTION #3: FOR THOSE THAT CULL BETTAS, WHAT METHOD DO YOU USE?



QUESTION #5: WHAT FISH SPECIES DO YOU USE FOR CULLING Wolffish 11% Freshwater Eel 11% Flowerhorn 45% As can be seen by the chart, about 60% of Betta Breeders use other fish species to cull Bettas. Other Methods came in second and other animal species came in third. For other animal species Turtles were the only other species mentioned in the survey.

As to other methods Freezing and Clove Oil tied for the number spot and some breeders used both together. Give to others was also chosen by approximately 20%. The survey did not dig any deeper as to what given away actually referred to as gifts or sold off. There were a few "Release into the Wild". I and the entire staff of the IBC is 100% against releasing any fish species into the wild. This is not only is this irresponsible, there are far reaching complications that can arise from this. Releasing an Aquarium Fish into the wild has to potential of introducing new diseases to fish that have never had these diseases or they could establish themselves and become invasive species. Domestic Bettas in their native range have interbred with wild populations causing some of the native species to becoming even more difficult to find in their natural form. States like Hawaii have very strict rules on Bettas for this very reason as well as countries like New Zealand and Australia also have severe import restrictions. So if you cannot deal with extra Bettas either cull them or give them away. Never release any species into the wild, no matter what!

As to what species were used for Culling the #1 cullernator happened to be Flowerhorns. Oscars came in at #2 with Arowanas, Fresh-Water Eels and Wolfish rounding out the bottom of the list.



The typical growth cycle of Domestic Bettas. Photo Courtesy of Stacy Fenhaus





A Visit to Coast Tropicals Article and Pictures by Clay Trachtman

The end of June / beginning of July 2018 were very adventurous times for me. Of course there was the American Cichlid Association annual convention in Houston, but I also started a new job. However, one of the last things I did for my former position was to go to Anaheim, CA to give a talk about private water wells. Not being one to let a fishy opportunity pass me by, I knew that I had to find something for me to do...

If you have ever been to a Petco within the last 5 years or so, you might have noticed that they really have some nice Siamese Fighting Fish (*Betta spendens*). They have all types now: Half-Moons, Rose-Tails, Double, Half-Moons etc. They also have giants (or as they call them, Kings) and Half-Moon Giants (Half-Moon Kings) (please note, I am not sure if there is an actual difference between what is called a King Betta and a Giant Betta, for my purposes, I call them the same thing).

It was because of Bettas that I became aware of Coast Tropicals. Five years ago or so, I was really into Giant Bettas, I could get the males from petco (\$25 each!), but there was no way that I could breed them as there were no Giant female Bettas available. As I was discussing the nice bettas with the Petco employee, she mentioned Coast Tropicals in passing, she did not say Fish Tales - 10 that is where they were coming from, but that was really all of the information that I needed (a little bit of advice to wanna be store owners, don't give away your sources to the competition, on that note, maybe I should go back and retract the name of the wholesaler.

With that little bit of knowledge, I went to google. I contacted Coast Tropicals and verified that they were the wholesaler providing the bettas to Petco. They also informed me that they do not sell to individuals, retail establishments only.

But alas, I was in luck. You see one of my good friends John Standiford owns Louisiana Fish Store (back at that time, he owned a saltwater maintenance business). Coast Tropicals brings in a large amount of saltwater fish, so John was willing to set up an account with them and place an order. But first we had to get them to bring in female half-moon king bettas, which Coast Tropicals said that they could do, they just had not done it in the past.

Once the Half-Moon King male and female Bettas arrived from Thailand, John placed the order. If I recall correctly, I brought in about 1 dozen males and 1 dozen females, kept and bred the ones that I liked, and sold the remainder on aquabid. And that was how I became aware of Coast Tropicals...

Fast forward to August, 2017. The Marine Aquarium Conference of North America (MACNA) was being held in New Orleans. Even though I don't keep saltwater, I volunteered my time to help out (this is something that I wish more people would do, especially if it is not something that you are really into, let the people that are really into something enjoy the conference). After doing my volunteering duties, I mingled in the vendor room. This was a huge conference. It took up 1 hall of the convention center in New Orleans. Not surprisingly, Coast Tropicals was one of the vendors there. Not only were they a vendor, but they had provided most of the fish for the display tanks at the conference.

By this time, John had already agreed to buy everything that Coast Tropicals brought to the conference for his store in Baton Rouge, and he was hanging out at their booth. I introduced myself and told them the story of the Half-Moon female King Bettas. I told them that I would be in Los Angles in June 2018, and hoped that I would be able to visit. I was told I could visit, but I would not be able to purchase anything as an individual. At that time, John stepped in and said that I would be cherry picking stuff for Louisiana Fish Store. All was agreed to.

About a year later, I made my way to Los Angles and got to visit Coast Tropicals. When I walked in, I was amazed at the number of aquariums. There must have been about 2000 aquariums, and that was just the freshwater portion of the operation. As far as I could tell, all of the aquariums were on the same plumbing system. Each aquarium got fresh water, and then overflowed into a community sump. From there it went to the filter.



People that knew I was going to a wholesaler requested that I try to get some really nice pairs of guppies. Surprisingly, Coast Tropicals had tons of guppies; however, not pairs. The females were just kept in mixed aquariums. I did pick up a few males from new strains that were not to be sold to the public (they said I could have some, they were testing out how they did in their system).

My father keeps gold fish. One thing that I always keep an eye out for are adult Panda goldfish. Panda goldfish are black and white. Unfortunately, they almost always change color as they grow up (and become rather ugly in my opinion); however, if you can find an adult, it might keep its colors. Coast Tropicals had tons of juvenile telescope panda gold fish but no adults. They also had 2 giant black orandas. These 2 fish were the largest orandas that I had ever seen (as in only 1 would fit in a shipping box). I wanted to get one for my father, but he said no via text message.

As for bettas, unfortunately they had all been well picked over. They were expecting another shipment the following week, but that would be too late for me.

Having completed my freshwater search, I went into the saltwater warehouse. The saltwater area is in a completely different building. Not being a salty, I could not provide any details of what they had. I can tell you that everything was pretty much picked over already, in fact it was in this area that the employee told me to come back on Monday. Most of the aquariums were empty, the stuff that they did have was very nice looking though. They even had one of my favorite fish, Rhinopias frondosa, the purple scorpion fish.

Overall, it was a fun experience. I would recommend doing something similar if you get the chance.



# **FOTAS CARES Show Awards**

The board of the Federation of Texas Aquarium Societies would like to thank and congradulate Klaus Steinhaus and Gregory Tucker for their beautiful designs which will be made into medas and made available for clubs putting on a live fish show. These will be awarded to the Best CARES Fish in Show and CARES Reserve Best in Show Fish.

# Caring for C.A.R.E.S.

What sparked my devotion to keeping endangered fish and why others should too.

How it all started:

On a dreary Friday night in January of 2018 the Greater Austin Aquarium Society was having its first ever meeting. The meeting was a huge success with twenty plus people showing up, but my biggest take away from the meeting was a brief comment and explanation about C.A.R.E.S. from a good friend of mine named Riccardo. After the meeting, I couldn't stop thinking about the idea of keeping and breeding endangered fish and spent the weekend learning more about it. I quickly found the C.A.R.E.S. website and I was hooked. I knew I wanted to get involved. The next big challenge was locating a species to devote to, after-all there are over a hundred at risk and endangered fish on the list. My first step was to decide what type of fish I wanted to keep and where I felt most comfortable. At the time, I was very familiar with live-bearers and knew that's what I wanted to proceed forward with. Well now that I narrowed down my search some, the next step was finding a species. Thanks to some awesome Facebook groups I was pointed to the direction of Greg Steeves. Many in the hobby may know of Greg, but if you don't just know he is an amazing guy who loves to help hobbyists and is one of my role models of the hobby. After sending Greg a message and telling him my dilemma, he had no hesitation in offering me some Xenotoca lyonsi. At the time, I had no idea what these fish were, But Google was my friend. They are a species of fish from the family Goodeidae. Come to find out, not many people in the hobby have heard of these type of fish, yet along even keep them. The best part for me was that they are live bearers. The next month which was March of 2018 I met up with Greg and received the fish. This was the peak of my fish keeping career, right there on that day.

A few months pass with the *Xenotoca lyonsi* and I notice one of the females is gravid and is nearing delivery of her babies. Unlike many live bearers, goodeids are much different in birthing. They take longer in the

## By: Ethan Grantham

pregnancy period and give birth to much fewer fry but have much larger fry. One night while taking a latenight bathroom visit I checked in on the tank and to my surprise I found fry in the tank. At this moment, I really thought I was dreaming and had to run to grab my phone in able to document the moment. Seconds pass and I get my phone and turn the light on for less than a minute just so I could get a video, but had to be fast as did not want to spook the momma. Surprisingly in the video I caught the female with a fry just leaving her and caught the whole fry being departed from the parent. Going back to sleep after this was not happening. The excitement of accomplishing what I set out to do was phenomenal. To this day, it is still the best day of the hobby for me.

In July of 2018 I picked up my second C.A.R.E.S. species which is *Ameca splendens*, another Goodeid species. With now owning two endangered fish I knew I was addicted. I just love the story being a fish and feeling like I am making a difference. There fish are truly beautiful and deserve to be kept. However, I wanted to branch out and get even more involved with something different. A month later after a lot of planning and a new tank scape I obtained a Victorian cichlid species. This new species is a cichlid endemic to Lake Kyoga, called *Haplochromis* sp. "ruby green". Now my love for endangered fish has expanded to a whole new type of fish.

Why others should devote a tank to a C.A.R.E.S fish:

You can make a difference, it's simple but very true. An individual can be the reason why a species will never go truly extinct. All you must do is devote one tank to an endangered or at risk species. You can find out more about C.A.R.E.S. through their website https:// caresforfish.org or the Facebook page. Together we can preserve these species so that they will be available for the next generation.

# Is Fishkeeping Ethical?

et's clear the air immediately. I don't have an answer to this question. My intention here is to explore some of my thoughts on the subject and in turn hopefully to inspire some of you reading this to make the same type of examination. Make no mistake, I want the resounding answer to be yes!! I want keeping fish to be a great thing to do in the grander scheme of things. There are broader questions to answer first but I am going to skip over them lest we find ourselves down the rabbit hole...or fish hole. I am going to skip questions like Is having a pet ethical? and Do our hobbies need to be ethical? This is a fish keeping magazine and so that's what I am going to focus on.

Three years ago I made some changes in my life. I stopped smoking, I stopped drinking and I stopped eating meat. Quitting smoking and drinking were not easy but also weren't exactly ethical decisions either. I just needed to give my poor body a break. I needed to breathe, I needed to clear my head. While going through those changes I started to think a lot about philosophy. I was listening to philosophy podcasts, reading, books and magazines trying to get distilled information about right and wrong, about who we are, what it means to be and different ways to live. This period of my life coincided with the start of my fishkeeping (career?). I read, skimmed, thumbed through a couple of books, one was Animal Liberation by Peter Singer and the other was the Ethics of What We Eat by Peter Singer and Jim Mason. I'll be honest I didn't finish either of these books but it didn't take a whole lot of reading to figure out that I loved animals and that I didn't need or want to have them killed for me to eat. This was really obvious to me when I visualized the commercial meat farms and the lives of the animals that are raised and slaughtered for me to eat. Quitting meat was a much easier than tobacco and alcohol and for that matter added sugar, dairy, caffeine and anything I have grown accustomed to over-indulging in.

Let's talk fish, hopefully you are still with me. When I think of Ethics I really think about whether or not I am causing harm, or perhaps even undue harm. I would

## By: Riccardo Camera

cause a fish harm if it wanted to square up and take a bite out of me. Let an endangered species look to harm my family and we are going to have words...outside... preferably out of the water. So yes I think we are talking about undue harm. Fishing for instance seems to me to cause undue harm. I really struggle with this one because I really want to fish, I want to see all the fish. If I could I would drain the lakes and rivers and fish by hand, picking up fish and looking at them. I just can't see the positive in fishing for the fish. If I felt like they enjoyed being hooked and dehooked I might even try catch and release. Still seems super stressful, even for a fish that probably doesn't have a highly developed sense of stress.

Ok, so I am not eating fish, and I am not fishing for fish. What about collecting fish? Netting them and removing them from their habitat. Is this undue harm? Does it matter what I do with the fish after I net it? I think its clear that just netting the fish doesn't create so much harm that the harm is irreparable so to speak. Unless my net is made of spikes or I am super careless. We can't deny that the simple act of netting a fish and removing it from its habitat does harm the fish on a very basic level. I don't think you can remove a fish out of its natural habitat without it noticing and without causing it stress and without disrupting its day. If I net it to end its life...well that's clearly undue harm. If I net it to put it in a tank in substandard conditions, that seems to me to be undue harm too. I think we have a responsibility to provide equal or better conditions, clearly though we cannot replicate the freedom of a lake or a river in an aquarium. We can however feed and treat the fish better and protect it from pollutants and prey. If this fish is in abundant numbers in the wild and we could perhaps observe it in other ways, is the captive fish better off than its wild cousin? I am not sure and I feel there is a lot of room to explore that question.

If a fish is endangered and I net it for the purpose of breeding it, does this compensate for the harm that I cause by removing it from its habitat? I am not sure that it is more ethical to let a fish go extinct in lieu of intervening.

I know that this has been a pretty shallow look at an extremely complex question, but I am glad that you took the time to take this journey with me today. I think that for myself I have laid a foundation on which I can go forward thinking about this subject. At a very basic level it seems to me that there is a gradient to the ethics of fishkeeping or I could say the human-piscine interaction. On one end you might find actions like, killing fish for entertainment, killing fish for variety in diet, or killing fish through gross negligence. In the middle you might find feeding fish to other fish or keeping fish in substandard conditions. At the other end you might find keeping fish with the hopes of bettering the life of one specimen or a species as a whole and maybe the most ethical choice of all, leaving the fish alone when there is no reasonable threat to its existence.

### **Editors Note:**

This picture is the perfect example as to why Fishkeeping by Hobbyists is critically important. This particular species is endangered and until this picture was taken this species was not know for Bi-Parental Mouthbrooding which this male is clearly brooding. Another group of this species was transfered to my son in law and his males also brooded. There is still a lot to learn about fish species and often times it is the Home Aquarist that discovers previously unkown information. There are also a number of species that are critically endangered or extinct in the wild and it is the Home Aquarist who keeps these species going. I have personally worked with my local zoo, (Tulsa Zoo) on species preservation and the Tulsa Zoo has used stocks of my species in their displays. I have also not only consulted with the Monterrey Bay Aquarium on an exibit but also supplied wild Bettas to that display.





The title of the email read "You'll never guess where I am". As I opened the attachment from my friend Lawrence Kent, a strange but incredible fish appeared. It was *Alcolapia grahami* and he was in Kenya at Lake Magadi, one of the soda lakes about 85km southwest of Nairobi near the Tanzanian border. He sent me a series of photos not only to heighten my jealousy, but Lawrence knew I maintained a closely related cichlid, *Alcolapia alcalicus*. *A. alcalicus* is found at Lake Natron, another 25 miles southwest of Lake Magadi.

The genus *Alcalapia* consists of four species: the afore mentioned *A. grahami* from Lake Magadi, *A. alcalicus* from Lake Natron, *A. ndalalani* from the southern lagoons also of Lake Natron and *A. latilabris* which can only be found in particular springs at the southern extremes of Lake Natron. *A. alcalicus* has been introduced in Lake Natron. *A. alcalicus* has been introduced in Lake Natron in Kenya, another soda lake along the right arm of the African Rift Valley. 10,000 years ago this region was a single very large shallow lake basin.

*Alcolapia* are tilapines. The name is derived from Arabic; "alco" referring to alkaline, a description of their harsh native water chemistry, and "lapia" as in tilapia. All members of the genus are somewhat similar in regards to overall appearance. They are torpedo shaped with distinct finnage. These are all small cichlids ranging from an adult size of 62mm for *A. ndalalani*, to 12cm for *A. alcalicus*. Up until the turn of the last century, *Alcolapia* was a sub genus of *Oreochromis*. Fish Tales - 16

*Oreochromis* are mouthbrooding tilapines. Seegers and Tichy in 1999 released a study showing both molecular and body structure differences that elevated *Alcolapia* to genus status. They also showed that radiation is occurring in the soda lakes creating new species along with distinct location variants. The thinking is that areas of these waterways are too inhospitable for even the soda lake cichlids. These caustic regions serve as barriers and separate populations allowing for diversification. To my knowledge, the only member of this genus currently in the hobby is A. alcalicus and it is not exactly readily available.

Soda lakes are considered to be the most hostile waters on the planet that support life. They are situated in a volcanically active area where evaporation has drastically increased both salinity and alkalinity levels. In Lakes Natron and Magadi, the pH is around 10 while the salinity is just under 10%. Areas of these waters contain open fissures where expelled volcanic gas can heat the water to in excess of 50° C. In Lake Natron, these mineral rich hot springs heat the shallow waters where salt loving haplophile organisms thrive. This includes cyanobacteria whose orange coloration often tinges the water. Here, huge flocks of lesser flamingos feed on the endemic algae as does *Alcolapia alcalicus*.

In the areas around the heat releasing fissures, the much sought after algae mats grow thick. The fish play a deadly game of rapidly jumping into the scalding water, tearing off a chunk of food and getting back to cooler water before they cook. The odd floating *A*.

*alcalicus* body shows us that the fish does not always win.

All four *Alcolapia* species are quite attractive. I think that an adult *A. alcalicus* male is a show stopper and even non fish people, when entering my fish room are drawn to this species. The male's long slender body is adorned with scales that have a brilliant metallic blue-green sheen. The head is colored with dull orange-yellow hues and the under slung mouth is lined with white-blue lips. The first several rays of the pelvic fins are black fading to hyaline. The pectoral fins are colorless. The anal fin

is clear but speckled with white dots. The caudal fin is spotted with small light blue or white dots while the back ground coloration is tinged red. The large saillike dorsal fin is mostly black with light dots between the rays. It is a most remarkably colored fish. The largest of the males will display the most vibrant coloration but even smaller less dominant individuals with exhibit pleasing color and finnage. The female has the same body shape but lacks the brilliant colors of the male. She is typically a silver-tan color with transparent fins.

I first got the opportunity to work with *A. alcalicus* several years ago. In preparation for their arrival



I studied native conditions including salinity, pH, and conductivity. Before this time I had no idea what a micro seimen even was. All I needed to do was replicate a thermal pool biotope made from the vent of an active volcano. What could be so tough about that? After all the advance work with meticulous attention to water parameters, one by one, I was able to kill them all off within two weeks. I knew these were an extremely rare cichlid and following this failure, I was willing to leave their well being to someone who was much more willing to alter water conditions than I was.

Fast forward a couple years. I was once again presented with the opportunity to work with a group of these



soda lake fish. Being a sucker for punishment I agreed to try my luck once again with a small group. They arrived on my doorstep two days later. My enthusiasm neurons are not directly connected with the part of my brain that controls planning. I had a bag of fish and no tank prepared for them. As if already condemning them to death, I placed them in an empty 20 gallon aquarium with no décor and a small air driven sponge filter until I could ready appropriate quarters for them. Planning on taking care of their housing the next day the time continuum extended and it became the next week... and so on. In the meantime, the small fish in the untreated tank were not only surviving

but thriving. They were eating the same flake food I fed most of my other fish (largely haplochromines) and appeared to be growing. As they put on a little size in the small tank, I got around to setting a 125 gallon tank up as their permanent residence. At this point in time I saw no reason to alter my water in any manner. It comes out of the hose with a pH of about 8, substantially lower than what their native waters would be. Being summer in south Texas, the water temperature is in the high 80's but I use no heaters in my aquariums. A. alcalicus does not mind the warm



fish room temperatures I experience in the summers and have even survived the low 70's in the winters. So, as you can see, my secret to successfully maintaining *A. alcalicus* is to do absolutely nothing. These fish are after all tilapines and have likely thrived in Lake Natron solely because there is no competition for food or space in this harsh environment.

Their aquarium is filtered by two large air driven sponges. The substrate is fine white sand with a few piles of slate stacked to form caves. There is ample open water with several Anubias and Aponogeton species spaced to green things up. Biweekly water changes of about 25% keep everyone happy. The setup is very simple yet apparently to the liking of A. alcalicus. In a stark contrast as to what I am used to with my haplochromines, these fish are active but communal and not at all aggressive with each other. I have not witnessed any establishment of a hierarchy with the females, no top dog or formation of a pecking order. Males will occasionally flare up at one another but I have yet to see so much as a torn fin. Although I have never seen the males doing any excavations, I commonly see small pits dug into the substrate. I had presumed that this is where the male creates a territory and where spawning takes place. I was wrong.

Fortunately I've gotten frequent spawning from my group. It is sometimes difficult to tell if a female is actually mouth brooding due to the rounded shape of the head. Their buccal cavity is not as pronounced as it is with my haplochromines. Until recently I had never Fish Tales - 18 witnessed the act of spawning but, as I said before, I had figured it was fairly typical to what I was used to. In a nutshell, the male builds a spawning pit, defends it against all other fish except for a gravid female which he spends his time showing to. This might include flaring his fins and shaking all the while, trying to lure the female back to his excavation. Here the male and female will circle each other, her dropping eggs, him fertilizing them, her scooping them up, and repeating this process until her mouth is full. I was incorrect in all counts!

A short while ago I was able to shoot some video of the spawning process. The pair I witnessed did not spawn in the depression the male had dug, but rather on the highest point of rockwork in the tank. This was a flat surface, slightly diagonal. The male approached the female, not with extended fins trying to look all masculine, but with almost clamped fins and his body bent into a strange arc. He and his female took position at the top of the rockwork and began shaking together. This was not the circular shaking done by my haplochromines, but rather a stationary vibrating beside each other. Both female and male had a small "nipple like" protrusion on the underside of their abdomen. The ovipositor in the female is a tube where the eggs are released while the male's appendage releases milt. The female releases one egg at a time and upon being expelled, it rolled down the incline to a small depression where it was collected. She would then keep in position but swim backwards, pick the egg up and move forward to repeat the process. All the while



the male did not erect his fins but rather continued displaying that strange arc thing that the female must have found attractive. The only time he flared up was when a rival male swam too close to the spawning spot. The breeding male would rear up on his haunches and chase the other male A. alcalicus away. Once spawning was over, it was business as usual. The male integrated back into the group as did the female who was not harassed in the least. She did not pick a secluded spot to brood but mingled with the other fish, even nipping at scraps of food when offered. I might add that the spawning procedure I witnessed from A. alcalicus is quite different from observations made of A. grahami in their native waters. A. grahami constructs a large step lek with several smaller satellite pits around the perimeter (Albrecht 1968).

*Alcolapia alcalicus* is a maternal mouthbrooder. When young, first spawns are very small with 6-8 fry to be expected. Once the fish have grown considerably, clutches of over 20 fry are normal. Much like haplochromines, the fish incubate the eggs for up to up to 18 days. At this point in time we generally isolate the fry to a tank of their own so I am unsure of how long female parental care continues post release. The fry grow quite quickly on a diet of crushed tropical flake and ground up powdered pellets.

During the time I have been working with *A. alcalicus* I have always kept the breeding groups in large tanks. I started out with a species only aquarium and eventually added a group of six *Synodontis ocellifer* to the

mix. This worked well as I have never noticed the two species interacting at all, and admittedly, I enjoy some diversity in my displays. As of late I have housed them with another unusual tilapine, *Oreochromis esculentus*. Again, the species are not bothered by one another and add to the allure of the aquatic environment. I will add that none of the three species have bothered the live plants which are thriving as well. I would think that some of the smaller *Coptodon* species such as *C. bythobates* would make acceptable tank mates as well.

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature has given a red

list category of VU (vulnerable) to *A. grahami, A. latilabris* and *A. ndalalani* and EN (endangered) to A. alcalicus. This ranking is mirrored by the C.A.R.E.S. Preservation program. I am aware of several hobbyists that are actively working with *A. alcalicus* and successfully propagating it. Ideally, there will come a time in the near future where captive stocks might just out number wild fish. Hopefully we will get a chance to prove our meddle with the other three species of *Alcolapia* but until that time, I am extremely privileged to have worked with such a unique fish and share a bit of satisfaction knowing that my breeding success have allowed others to enjoy the species as much as I have. Now, to get some breather bags to Lawrence.....

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# **Introducing the FOTAS BAP**

## **By Clay Trachtman**

Beginning in 2019, the Federation of Texas Aquarium Societies (FOTAS) will establish a Breeder's Award Program (BAP) to encourage members to breed a greater variety of fish and to share with others the knowledge they have gained.

Many FOTAS member clubs already have a BAP in place, this BAP is not meant to replace individual club BAP's, but in some cases may do so. I know that, for example, the BAP in the Southeast Louisiana Aquarium Society (SELAS) is essentially on life-support, with only 2 members still participating, so for SELAS, this will replace the SELAS BAP. If your club continues with its own BAP, you can still participate in the FOTAS BAP, they are not mutually exclusive. One of the biggest differences between the FOTAS BAP and other BAP's is that FOTAS BAP will be based on an honor system.

### Basics

- •Each entry must have a scientific name
- •In order to qualify, the fry must have survived for 60 days
- •Each person can only enter a specific species once, no additional points for color varieties
- •At a minimum, the entry must contain the scientific species name, the number of fry, as well as a brief description of the set up as well as the breeding process (about 1 paragraph)
- •Each successful BAP submission will earn 10 points
- •5 bonus points will be awarded if an article is written and accepted for publication in FOTAS Fish Tales
- •5 bonus points will be awarded if the fish is listed as a CARES Species

### Entry Details

Each entry must have a scientific name: Each fish that you enter for the FOTAS BAP must be a recognized species. This means that fish like hybrids or flowerhorns will not count towards BAP points. However, fish that have the same scientific name but have different collection points or outward characteristics will be considered different species. For example, *Aulonocara stuartgranti* "Ngara" (commonly referred to as a Ngara Flametail) would be considered a different fish from *Aulonocara stuartgranti* "Undu Reef" (commonly referred to as a Blue Neon Peacock).

In order to qualify, the fry must have survived for 60 days: This is pretty self-explanatory. In order to qualify for the FOTAS BAP, your fry must survive for 60 days. FOTAS BAP organizers are not going to physically verify that your fry have survived for 60 days, this where the honor system comes in. FOTAS BAP organizers believe that if you are going to participate, that you will be honest.

Each person can only enter a specific species once, no additional points for color varieties: With selective breeding, the same species of fish no come in a variety of colors / fin varieties. For the purposes of the FOTAS BAP, a participant can only get points for the species of fish once. For example, if a person breeds black angelfish one time, and then silver veil tail angelfish another time, they would only get BAP credit for the black angelfish. Another example would be bristlenose plecos. There are many varieties of bristle nose Plecos: super red, common, blue eyed, long fin, short fin, etc, but they are all believed to be from the same species of fish (*Ancistrus* cf. *cirrhosis*).

At a minimum, the entry must contain the scientific species name, the number of fry, as well as a brief description of the set up as well as the breeding process (about 1 paragraph): This is the minimum requirements to get credit in the FOTAS BAP. However, you are not limited to this amount. At the time of this writing, the plan is for all of this information to be placed on the FOTAS website in a table format. Below are 2 examples of acceptable BAP Submissions:

ENTRY 1: On March 23, 2019 my *Betta splendens* laid eggs. The father was a blue betta, the mother was a red female. The male looked after the eggs for 2 days until they hatched. He kept the fry in a bubble nest. At about a week of age, I removed the father and fed the fry microworms. Once they got bigger, I fed them baby brine shrimp. It is now August 3, 2019 and my fry are ready to find their permanent homes. There are a total of 8 male fry and 11 female fry.

ENTRY 2: I have successfully spawned my yellow lab cichlids! Their scientific name is *Labidochromis cae-ruleus*. I noticed that the female was holding eggs in her mouth on 1/16/2019. I caught her and put her in a 10 gallon aquarium by herself. I saw fry on 2/2/2019. The fry have been in the 10 gallon for 3 months now eating flake food. I brought 15 fry to my local store for credit.

Both of the above entries are acceptable. The more information the better though. Feel free to include information like aquarium size, where the fish came from, water parameters, really anything that you want. Ideally, we hope to keep an online database similar to the one currently found here: https://www.selas.us/wp/bap-table/.

### Point Details

The FOTAS BAP is really an honor system. There are no cash awards. However, certificates of achievement will be presented at the annual FOTAS Convention.

Each successful BAP submission will earn 10 points: The FOTAS BAP is different from other BAP's in that there is no difference in the number of points that you receive based on the perceived difficulty in breeding that particular fish. In the FOTAS BAP, a successful entry for breeding guppies is the same as breeding discus. All entries are worth 10 points, regardless of difficulty.

5 bonus points will be awarded if an article is written and accepted for publication in FOTAS Fish Tales: FOTAS Fish Tales, the official publication of FOTAS, is always in need of articles. If you are willing to forth the time and effort to write an article for FOTAS Fish Tales about your fish breeding experience of a certain species, you will receive 5 bonus points. In the event that your article does not get accepted into FOTAS Fish Tales, the publisher will let the FOTAS BAP Program know and you will still get 5 bonus points.

5 bonus points will be awarded if the fish is listed as a CARES Species: The CARES (Conservation, Awareness, Recognition and Responsibility, Encouragement and Education, and Support and Sharing) Preservation Program goal is to encourage hobbyists worldwide to devote tank space to one or more species at risk and distribute offspring to fellow qualified hobbyists. If an entry is listed on the CARES website, you will be awarded 5 bonus points. The CARES website is: https://caresforfish.org.

### Awards

Certificates of Achievement will be presented at the annual FOTAS Convention based on the following levels of points earned:

- •50 Points Novice Breeder
- •100 Points Intermediate Breeder
- •200 Points Breeder
- •500 Points Advanced Breeder
- •1000 Points Expert Breeder

Other certificates may be awarded as well, but nothing official is planned. Ideas include "Rookie of the Year" for the person that gets the most points in their first year of participation (for that year) or "Breeder of the Year" for the person that gets the most points for that calendar year. There also may be club awards for the FOTAS member club that gets the most points that year.

### Transfer of Points

As 2019 will be the first year of the FOTAS BAP, transfer points will be allowed. 10 points will be awarded per species per person, provided that person submits the minimum deliverables:

- •Scientific Name
- •Date of Occurrence (year only)
- •Number of Fry
- •Brief Description of the Set Up
- •Brief Description of the Breeding Process

Certificates of Accomplishment will NOT be awarded for any levels reached by using transfer points alone (meaning first awards will be at the 2020 FOTAS Convention).

### Submissions and Question / Comments

We are still in the very early stages of the FOTAS BAP, and we reserve the right to make changes in the future. Any changes made in the future would apply to previous submissions retroactively. FOTAS BAP submissions, questions or comments can be sent to Clay Trachtman: clayt101@cox.net.

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