

Pangasius Problems



Pangasius sanitwongsei

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As I answered the phone, I was quite unaware of the crisis at the other end of the line that had prompted the call. The poor lady's voice sounded almost hysterical and I could hear a man's voice cussing and swearing in the background.

Eventually, I got the gist of the problem. The small catfish which the couple had inherited with their secondhand tropical aquarium was now over eighteen inches (45cm) long. It couldn't turn around properly, as the tank was only eighteen inches (45cm) wide.

It had developed the very frightening habit of charging from one end of its aquarium to the other in a mad fit and ramming its head against the end pane of glass.

Apparently, every so often there was a loud thwacking sound as the fish's head hit the glass, and its poor owners were terrified that it was either going to hurt itself badly, or break the glass and flood the living room carpet, or both!

I was told that it already had damage to one of its eyes and a large raw bulbous lump on the end of its snout, caused by the repeated poundings!

After a few questions, the type of catfish was established - a member of the *Pangasius* genus. It didn't surprise me - I almost expected it. More alarming was the next bit of information I deduced from its owner's description - it was a Paroon Shark, *Pangasius sanitwongsei*, one of the largest species of catfish in the world.

Its owners were very fond of it, and had tried to re-home it many times but no one would take it. They had asked all the local fish shops and they had telephoned various zoos and Sea-Life Centres, but with no luck.

It caused me to recall a worrying incident a year or two ago whilst browsing in a local fish shop. There were two adjoining aquariums, each containing a species which I knew to be completely unsuitable for sale to the general public, *Pangasius hypophthalmus*, and *Pangasius sanitwongsei*. They were small specimens, 2 to 3 inches long, and were for sale for less than £7 each.

P. hypophthalmus can attain a length of 52 inches (130cm), but *P. sanitwongsei* can reach a maximum length of over 100 inches (250cm). There is a documented account of a large specimen of *P. sanitwongsei* being responsible for the death of a native fisherman, who accidentally spiked himself on a sharp fin spine.

In order to find out how much the staff knew about their stock, I approached an assistant and expressed an interest in purchasing one of these catfish. I asked him how large each species would grow, and if they were suitable for my (imaginary) 36" community aquarium. He confidently assured me that the *P. hypophthalmus* would grow to 8 - 9 inches, and was therefore fine for my tank, but that the *P. sanitwongsei* would grow to 18 inches, and would need slightly larger quarters.

I then asked to speak to the manager and suggested somewhat vehemently that his staff should be made aware of the requirements of the species on sale in his shop and I further recommended that he put stickers on the tanks, informing customers of the potential size that each of these species can grow to!

Nowadays, some conscientious shops have a 'No Big Fish' policy, but there are many shops that are still happy to sell juvenile tank-busters that soon grow far too large for the customers' tanks, although sometimes, it's the fault of the customer for not asking "how big will it grow?"

Of all the phone calls and requests we get to re-home catfish that have outgrown their home aquariums, calls to re-home *Pangasius* are more numerous than all the other species put together, at a ratio of 2 to 1.

There is also the problem of the terrible suffering inflicted on some of the unfortunate fish by the often cruel and inhumane methods of disposal that are resorted to by some heartless owners, such as putting them in the freezer to freeze to death slowly, or beating their heads in with a blunt object, or releasing them into lakes and rivers.

I don't have to tell you that the last of these methods of disposal can have devastating effects on our native fish species and aquatic ecosystems.

What can be done to help these poor fish whose only fault is that they grow too large for a community tank?

- Firstly, we need to address the problem at source, and persuade wholesalers not to import these and similar sized species.
- Secondly, we need to convince retailers that it is not good business practice to sell these future tank-busters in the first place, if only out of concern for the ultimate fate of the poor creatures.
- Finally, we need to teach customers who insist on purchasing these tank-busting species, often as status symbols, that owning a pet of any kind is a huge responsibility and that they should do their research and homework before making the purchase, so that they are fully aware of what they are taking on.

Think of it this way - if the creature in question was warm-blooded, cute and cuddly, and covered in fur or feathers, it would be unlawful to house it in a cage so small that it couldn't turn round.

It would also be a criminal offence to kill or injure it, or to dispose of it in any inhumane or illegal way.

However, when the poor victim is a cold-blooded fish, there are those who feel that it is quite normal and acceptable to inflict appalling cruelty on it and that it just doesn't matter.

Obviously, some ignorant people think that it's only warm-blooded creatures that suffer stress or pain - how wrong they are!

Daphne Layley
For and on behalf of The Southern Counties Catfish Rescue Society