

Customer Perceptions towards Aquatic Pets and how that Influences Farming/Catching, Trading and Caring for these Animals in the Aquatic Trade Industry from both Fish Farms and Wild Caught Populations

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OPINION ARTICLE

One of the best days of my life was when I read the email that said I was hired as a sales assistant for a local aquatic specialist franchise branch. I had wanted to work in a petshop since I was a kid but my studies in Zoology and Genetics were sending me down a different career path and I categorised that as a childhood dream. So you can imagine how 5 years old I felt when I read that email at 31. This experience was well worth the time and it made me more aware how the Aquatic Trade Industry (ATI) operates, the customers' perception of aquatic organisms and set-ups and how those two factors affect fish farming and wild catching.

The range of customer knowledge of aquatic organisms and set-ups (at least at my shop) was quite diverse. Some had been doing it longer than my parents have been alive, some had PhDs or similar, others understood minimal basics, I had a customer who rocked on up to the counter with a glass bowl and confidently asked how many Goldfish he could have in it. I replied immediately with "None." He was not a happy customer. But while there was a diverse range of aquatic skill, most customers (and look'e'loos) fell into the 'fish live in water and nothing else' demographic. As a Zoologist it was mind numbing to be told that, like a patient telling a doctor about their illness and how it should be treated.

This in turn wasn't helped by the ATI (that I worked for) pandering to these customers on a regular basis and only giving enough information to customers so that they solved their current issue but came back with a different one. What this did and still does is make the customers dependent on the shop and they were unlikely to do any research of their own. Because of this we often were selling organisms knowing that they were not likely to survive to their full life expectancy in the customer's aquarium and they were likely to come back and get more organisms to "fill" their tanks. This is how some ATIs operate and because of this it influences and keeps the fish farming/catching sustained when the model is not sustainable and is environmentally detrimental.

Because we were and are serving a lot of customers who did not know what they were doing (most of the time) we would naturally purchase more livestock from both fish farms usually in Asia and wild caught from various wild caught distributors worldwide to fill our aquariums. This kept the cycle going.

Fish farming as it stands worldwide is not sustainable (different discussion though) but importantly we are importing organisms that we can breed ourselves locally but the reason for purchasing from Asia is that the livestock is cheaper i.e. less than 1 pence for a Neon Tetra. By ordering

from so far away we needed to transport them via airlines and that adds on an additional environmental cost by polluting the atmosphere with more CO₂.

With wild caught organisms the natural habitats and the population numbers are in rapid decline from human populations and climate change we can often overlook that we are taking more wild caught livestock out of the natural system than we are putting back in. This not only decreases genetic diversity of the species being caught but increases the likelihood of extinct.

Customers do not either know or perceive this to be a problem and unfortunately the ATI needs to take some responsibility for, in my case, allowing this cruel cycle of animal abuse to happen. Essentially we need to take a look at how our industry currently runs and face these challenges head on. But it's not all bad news.

The customers at my shop realised very quickly that I would be willing to explain virtually everything and assist them in their own research if they didn't know what they were doing. It was so much so that people around the city referred to and identified me as the Aussie Fish Guy. I'm from New Zealand. I let it go as I needed my pay package more than I needed to correct them for their cardinal sin. But these patrons and many, many others as sometimes I would have a group of them follow me around as I was serving one customer face to face, customers wanted to learn. That was the most rewarding thing that came out of working for my ATI, that they wanted to know how to care for organisms and their aquarium set-ups and give them the best life they can. Like any pet owner should.

So for anyone reading this please, please, please do not be afraid to ask something you do not know because to say that everything you know now is because of common-sense and not experience is farcical and will only lead to problems you don't understand how to resolve and you are only going to quit. There are a lot of people like myself, this publication, and others who want you to teach so my recommendation is to look on YouTube for Aquatic Specialists of which there are a lot.

I can assure you all that if I knew there was a customer who did not know what it was they were doing I refused to serve them. Have a great day.

It's not fantastic. In fact in some cases I think 'room for improvement' is an understatement for how atrociously bad our industry needs to reform. One of the most influential factors is how knowledgeable customers are and how much information the ATI is willing to provide.

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It was gut-rending and illegal for myself and my company to do this but that is the ATI as it is today.

How customers view aquatic pets:

Cons:

- As ornaments
- Less important/valuable
- Not “real” pets.
- Easy to take care of resulting in lack of care and/or lack of learning

Pro:

- Stunning/beautiful
- Easy to take care of but must understand the basics to do it correctly
- Understand what their level of skill is and will ask for assistance

How customers feel about plants and corals

- Complicated
- A waste of time
- A waste of money/scam

How aquatic trade (maidenhood aquatics) are influenced by customer perceptions

Tendency to keep customers uneducated enough so that they are reliant on the store/company. Fishkeeper Scotland school Fry scheme which deliberately misinformed children on how to correctly set up and care for aquatic animals (snails, shrimp, fish).

Concept of cheap pets

A manipulative push to get people to purchase minimum species school size in X fish for \$Y to sell livestock from the aquariums so they can be refilled. This is the same with some products i.e. cheap snakeoil medicines, cheap crappy equipment.