

The Joy of Octopus Ownership

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My interest in aquaria and tropical fish started as a fascination with the aquarium in the waiting room of my uncle's dental office. This fascination led me to buy my first aquarium when I was twelve years old. It was a whopping ten-gallon beauty, into which I introduced one female and two male guppies, a little catfish to keep the gravel clean (supposedly), a small angelfish and a few little neon tetras.

Male guppies are very small and colorful, while the females are about three times as large and quite drab. The female guppy in my new aquarium was almost continuously pregnant, so the guppy population flourished uncontrollably until a larger aquarium was needed about a year later. So, a new thirty-gallon aquarium wound up atop my dresser, the ten-gallon demoted to an adjacent table.

I then purchased a pair of zebra danios. That would be a male and a female zebra danio. They were a handsome couple, with rows of narrow, dark green stripes from eye to tail. I introduced the male danio to the thirty-gallon community tank and put the female all by herself in the ten-gallon one, which now had a layer of marbles in the bottom instead of gravel. The idea here was to put the male in the tank with her after a suitable period of separation. The two sex-starved little fish would then mate, the resultant eggs falling down to the bottom between the marbles where Mommy and Daddy couldn't eat them. The strategy worked perfectly. I then removed the parents to the community tank and waited for the grand opening! In less than two weeks, I was the proud father (at age 13) of more than 50 baby zebra danios. The survival rate was not great, but I still got to take almost two dozen full grown fish back to the store and trade them for a really nice scatophagus.

This was now a full-fledged hobby. At one point I converted the ten-gallon tank into a marine aquarium, which, due to my irrepressible combination of ignorance and arrogance, was an utter failure. I brought home and killed, by no means intentionally, a number of beautiful, innocent and expensive coral reef fish. After a while, the ten-gallon wound up empty and dry in the garage. I kept and maintained the larger one until my early twenties, when I finally fulfilled my parents' fondest wish and moved out of their house.

I didn't get another aquarium until many years later, when my wife and I had been married for about six years and had a house of our own. The family room in that house had one long, empty wall just calling out for an impressive, huge aquarium. So, 100-gallons here we come! The tank was what was known as a 100-gallon high. It was thirty inches tall, five feet wide, and twelve inches deep front to back. 18-inch-deep models held 100 gallons. Mine held 85. The community

of choice for this tank was African cichlids. These fish are almost as varied and colorful as reef fish. They live in brackish lakes, and most interestingly, they are mouth-breeders. The male and female perform a mating dance, the female lays her eggs in a “nest,” actually just a small depression in the sand, then the male ejaculates his sperm over them and picks them up in his mouth. He carries the eggs in his mouth until they hatch, then afterward carries the babies in his mouth for another couple of weeks. He eats nothing at all until the young have left his mouth to forage on their own. Once they’re swimming freely on their own, he’ll eat them just like any other small fish. Watching these cichlids was incredibly fascinating, but I had always had a desire for a marine aquarium. In my opinion, the only animals that rival coral reef fish for beauty and variety are birds, especially tropical birds.

Our house had a loft over the garage, in which I had installed a plywood floor. We had a handyman finish the room with cheap paneling, indoor-outdoor carpeting, and a dropped ceiling. This was where I decided to finally set up my marine fish tank. It should be noted, I was now somewhat knowledgeable and definitely responsible, unlike twenty years earlier.

Thirty gallons seemed like the right size to start with. It was truly gorgeous when it was done. In addition to the maroon clownfish, blue hippo tang, sweetlips, wrasse, and pink goat fish, there were invertebrates, too. There had to be an anemone for the clownfish to play with, some tube worms, a marine hermit crab, and a beautiful red and orange cleaner shrimp to keep the fish’s gills and skin healthy. This shrimp would station himself on top of a piece of coral where the fish would come for a cleaning. It was remarkable to see the fish submit to this, even though it was obviously rather unpleasant. I enjoyed this tank immensely while still maintaining the cichlid tank downstairs.

The hermit crab was a fascinating character. I provided him with several larger shells of different sizes, in case he needed them to grow into, which he did from time to time. He became an attractive and central presence in the tank, eventually situating himself right in the center of the floor of the tank, facing the front, posing as if he knew just how beautiful he was, and wanted everyone to notice. He really was quite pretty, with dark brown vertical stripes on his off-white shell.

I got a shock one day when I went to the tank and saw the shrimp lying dead at the bottom. It took a few moments for me to realize that the shrimp had molted, leaving its old shell there while it went into hiding until its new shell fully hardened. Also, the wrasse was nowhere to be seen. It was just another little piece of information of which I was not aware. Wrasses are burrowing fish. He was perfectly fine, just hiding in the gravel and sand. I learned a lot about all these creatures over time. But my greatest lessons were taught to me by the octopus I later introduced into this community.

Martin’s Aquarium was the place where I had purchased everything I had ever needed for my hobby. When I was starting out as a boy, their small store was located walking distance from my home in Northwest Philadelphia. Some years later, they moved to Jenkintown, about a thirty-minute drive from where I lived as an adult in the suburbs. This new location was easily ten times the size of the previous one, and the marine tanks were many, and very impressive.

Always on the lookout for some new and interesting creature to add to the community, I found a small sea cucumber and a couple of nudibranchs.

Some months later, on a visit to Martin's Aquarium, I saw that they had an octopus in the first tank in the top row as I entered the store. It was all curled up in a corner, just a drab-colored blob. I could've sworn it looked right at me as I walked past, so I turned around to go back and have a closer look. This drew the attention of one of the salespeople there. She said, "Whaddya think?" I said, "It looks like an alien to me." Then I extended my arm and pointed right at it, and it abruptly changed the left half of itself very dark brown, almost black. When I say half, I mean precisely half, with a sharp division between the two colors. "What just happened?" I asked. She (Anita was her name) said, "It felt threatened. That was a warning." At that juncture, I knew I had to have it. What a fantastic creature! I asked Anita what I thought were all the appropriate questions. She assured me that, despite its 18-inch "wingspan" with its tentacles fully extended, it was not too big for my tank. When I asked about feeding it, she sold me packages of frozen chopped clams and squid. "Just put some on a wooden dowel and touch it to a tentacle and he'll grab it right up," she said. She then described just how carefully it needed to be handled on the trip home, and also while being introduced into the aquarium—much, much more carefully than when introducing a new fish. "Keep it in the dark overnight, and most important—be gentle. Take it slow and easy! If it squirts ink in your tank, it'll kill everything."

I followed her instructions carefully, and all went well. I kept the lights out and the door closed to the loft room.

That evening, my wife and I had another couple over for dinner. After dessert, while our wives stayed downstairs, I told my friend that he must come upstairs to see the aquarium with the new addition that I had just brought home that afternoon. "Now we have to be really quiet. And it has to be dark in that room, so I'll open the door just enough for us to squeeze in, then I'll turn on this flashlight and gradually let some of the light shine on the tank." Once in the loft room, I turned on the flashlight, aimed at the floor. I gradually raised the beam, very slowly allowing the light into the aquarium. There was the octopus right in the middle of the floor of the tank, its body slowly throbbing and pulsing, every now and then spewing out a leg or two from my prized hermit crab. The young woman at Martin's had neglected to tell me that crabs were far and away Number One in any octopus's diet. I was horrified and embarrassed. My friend said, "Octopus. Cool."

Thus began my "relationship" with this creature. I fed it some frozen squid or clam every morning before leaving for work. I came home for lunch every day to feed it, then again at dinnertime and bedtime. I didn't want it eating any more of its new neighbors. A few days after starting this regimen, when I went home at lunchtime to feed it, I found it slithering along the floor of our upstairs hallway. After a few agonizing minutes trying to figure out what to do, I got a plate from the kitchen and managed to encourage Mr. Octopus to crawl onto it. I then transferred him back to the aquarium. Scary? Very. As a temporary measure to prevent him from escaping again, I covered all the openings at the top of the tank with plastic wrap.

A planned vacation getaway was only a few weeks ahead. I had to make plans for aquarium care very soon. Next door to us, on both sides, teenage girls lived. They were best friends, quite mature for their age, and very smart. I asked them if they would be willing to take care of the aquarium for a week while we were away. I would pay them, of course, just like babysitting. They agreed, and we set up a time for me to teach them what to do and how to do it. “What could be so complicated? It’s just a fish tank,” they said. “You’ll see,” I replied.

There were two fish tanks, of course. Can’t forget those beautiful African cichlids. I showed them that one first. No problem. Very straightforward and simple. Then I showed them upstairs to the loft room. At first, they didn’t notice the octopus. He was coiled up in his favorite resting place—the top left corner in the back, almost out of sight completely. They weren’t familiar with coral reef fish, and so were thrilled with their brilliant colors and strange shapes. And they were especially fascinated by the invertebrates; that is, until I pointed out the octopus. Their response was a combination of fear and revulsion. I assured them that this creature was very smart, and posed no threat, but needed to be fed separately from the rest of the animals. I got some of his food from the freezer, showed them how to attach a small ball of squid or clam to the pointed stick, and touched one of his tentacles with it. He grabbed it and pulled on it rather forcefully. This startled the girls. I said, “It’s very important not to let go of the stick. He can pull on it all he wants, like a dog with a sock. He just wants to get the food to his mouth.” Then I let each of them try it. They found it much easier than they thought it would be, so they agreed to aquarium-sit for us while we were away. Whew! Problem solved. Heather and Rebecca did a fine job. We returned from our trip to find all the animals still alive, happy and well taken care of.

One day, some weeks later, when I came home from work and went upstairs to feed the octopus, I found that he had fed himself. The skeleton of the goat fish, picked completely clean, every bone intact, lay on the bottom of the tank, right where the hermit crab used to sit. I looked at the octopus. He did not appear to feel guilty, but it could not have been anyone else. Instead of going downstairs and having dinner, I immediately (pardon the expression) “fished” him out of the tank into a plastic bag filled with aquarium water, drove all the way to Jenkintown, dropped him off at Martin’s, and thanked them for the experience of a lifetime—certainly one I’d never forget.

