

CLEANING AT A SNAILS' PACE

by Chase Klinesteker SWAM, Sept-Oct 2005



Red Ramshorn

Spixi

Striped Columbian Ramshorn

Pond

THE PROBLEM

Many aquarists tend to overfeed their fish to try and condition for breeding or get fast growth of fry. I am just as guilty of this as the next person. Problems arise when uneaten food or debris remains long enough to pollute the water and cause excess bacterial growth, possibly even killing our fish. We need to clean the bottom of our tanks often enough to prevent this. It may mean daily cleaning chores, especially in some fry tanks. There are numerous methods devised to clean our aquariums of excess food and dead plant material, which can pollute water quickly. Siphons, power filters, glass scrapers, stirring and removing with a fine mesh net, and plant scissors are often used.

PICKY FISH

Not all fish eat all the food that we feed them. Often I see fish spit out certain type flakes yet consume others from a mixed flake food. When we try to feed our fish a variety of foods for best nutrition, there may be an adjustment period where fish need to get used to eating different types of foods. Some fish species are very slow and deliberate eaters and it is hard to tell how much they will consume in a given amount of time. And some fish are just plain finicky and seem to always pick and choose only what they want (sound familiar moms and dads?). All this can result in tank cleaning chores that may take considerable time, especially if several tanks are being maintained.

CLEANER FISH

Different species of catfish or other bottom feeders are frequently used to clean up excess food, but they should be adequately fed also, not just exist on excess scraps. These fish may have certain limitations also. Corydoras catfish should not be put in a tank with sharp edged gravel (e.g. flint) or they may wear their barbells down. Sand seems to work best for them. Also, corys can eat small fry and can't be used there. They are very slow eaters and it may take them a long time to finish "cleaning up", resulting in pollution anyway. Plecostomus catfish also are used to clean up tanks. They are excellent at it but can get very large and can harass other fish who are trying to eat. In addition, I would not trust them with small fry or big slow fish like discus or angelfish. If any fish spawn in the tank and try to protect the eggs, plecos will sneak in at night or bull their way in and eat them. Barbs and several other groups of fish pick much of their food off the bottom, but they often have limitations as "cleaners" too.

HAIL THE SNAIL!

Is there a near ideal "cleaner" species that will save us time and worry from the effects of bacterial blooms in our aquariums? I submit the LOWLY SNAIL as that near perfect cleaner! Have I gone mad? Most people try to get rid of snails in their tanks! Yet snails offer many advantages. They are very efficient at cleaning up uneaten food and dead plant leaves yet not so fast that the slowest eating fish won't get their share. They

multiply quickly to cover the job that needs to be done. The old adage “Many hands make light work” applies here (if we substitute “feet” instead of hands!). Greater numbers of snails is a barometer indicating that too much is being fed to the fish so adjustments can safely be made. They will even eat rotting food which other “cleaners” may not touch. I am referring only to the smaller snails such as ramshorn, pond, spixi, and Japanese livebearing. I feel the larger snails (apple, mystery, etc.) are a greater risk to causing dangerous bacterial blooms when they die (and they surely will eventually). I have lost entire tanks of fish in the past due to one large, dead, and hidden mystery snail. If your nose discovers it, it is usually too late!

PLANT EATERS?

The most common complaint about these snails is that they destroy plants. I have not found this to be true unless the plants are unhealthy, not growing well, or there is an overabundance of snails, although spixi and Columbian Ramshorn will eat plants. If holes begin to appear in some softer plants (eg hygrophylla, valisneria, etc.), that is a sign that I need to make water changes, light, or nutritional adjustments for my plants, or that the snail population is too high. This is another “barometer” to keep me on my toes in maintaining healthy fish and plants. If a fish dies for some reason or other, the snails will quickly appear and begin “detoxifying” the situation. Snails will even help control some types of algae. I do not overfeed my fish on purpose, but with about 50 tanks to maintain, I cannot spend a lot of time watching my fish eat, so it does occur at times.

SNAILS AND FRY

Snails are most helpful in fry tanks, where we are feeding heavily to get fast growth. As soon as the eggs hatch and fry begin to swim, we can add snails to clean up the excess. To keep the water clear, I like to add some daphnia also. Neither will harm the tiniest of fry. For tiny, difficult to feed fry, this is especially helpful (discus, uaru, rainbows, certain tetras, etc.). Getting rid of excess snails is fairly simple. A weighted piece of lettuce or slice of cucumber on the bottom overnight will be covered with them the next morning, and they can be removed with a net. For Japanese livebearing snails, a small chunk of beefheart left on the gravel overnight will be covered the next morning. Be sure to remove it and the snails as soon as possible, since decaying meat can pollute the water quickly. I prefer to keep only a few snails in each tank. It will stay that way for a fairly long time if things are kept in balance. Forget about totally eliminating them. It is too difficult and not necessary.

The best cleaning job comes from using a combination of snails, catfish, and other methods to keep our tanks clean and healthy. Snails are not perfect and have some limitations. Yet I feel that I could not maintain my fishroom as it is without them. They may clean at a snails’ pace, but they do a terrific job!