

WEATHERING THE STORM

by Chase Klinesteker SWAM, Nov-Dec 2005



4-Day winter power outage in Michigan

THE SITUATION

A few years ago the West Michigan area had a severe ice storm that caused an electricity blackout for several days. This can cause real problems for the survival of our tropical fish! Our house was completely out of electricity for over 4 days and the outside temperature was below freezing, even into the teens some. There was no supplemental heat or electricity available. I feel fortunate that only a few fish were lost from over 40 tanks in my fishroom, partly due to efforts to conserve heat. I will try to explain what was done so that others may benefit in the future from what I learned.

We live in a brick ranch house that is fairly well insulated. The fishroom is in the basement. It is insulated on all 4 sides and the ceiling. Although the inside measurements are only 9 feet X 8 feet, the room has over 700 gallons of water in various sized tanks. There is one small window in the room, but I usually cover that with Styrofoam in the winter to reduce heat loss. Most of my tanks are covered, which helped reduce heat loss. The object was to hold the heat contained in the large volume of water as long as possible.

WHAT WAS DONE

When the electricity went out, I went down to the basement and made sure the fishroom door was tightly closed. A towel was placed along the bottom of the door to seal the gap and keep out any light. I wanted to make sure that it was pitch dark in there so the fish would not be active and consume more oxygen. The temperature in the top tanks was 78 degrees and in the bottom tanks about 70 degrees. We wanted to stay in the house as long as possible so we closed all curtains and shades after making sure all windows were sealed. All activities that would increase heat loss were kept to a minimum (front door opening, garage door open, etc). When the sun was out, we opened the curtains on that side of the house to gain some solar effect. We did not burn wood in the fireplace as I had heard that much more warm air goes out the flue than is retained from the fire.

I only entered the fishroom a few times in those 4 days, making sure the door was quickly closed behind me. With a flashlight I could see the fish quietly resting on the bottom of the tank. I would check the water temperature each time and see if any fish were gasping at the waters' surface. This only was seen in a few tanks on the fourth day and then I would place a battery operated minnow aerator for about 5 minutes in the tank. Toward the end of the fourth day, the temperature was below 50 degrees in the house and we were getting ready to move out. We could take a warm shower because the gas water heater was still working, but it was getting plain uncomfortable being there! Luckily, the electricity came on just in time or I am sure I would have lost many more fish.

WHEN THE POWER CAME ON

The temperature had gotten down to 60 degrees in the lower tanks and 65 degrees in the top ones. When the electricity came on we let the water temperature come up slowly (I don't have any heaters in my tanks as the lights and air pump keep the room warm). I only lost fish from one tank because of overcrowding. The colder temperatures and the darkness did not seem to affect the fish or the plants much at all. I think I was more fortunate than many in the area.

Power outages in the winter can be a very stressful time for both fish and their keepers! By darkening tanks and conserving heat we have a much better chance to make it through.