

Select Aquatics of Erie, CO.

How to Move a Fishroom 1200 Miles!

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The other day a friend at a local fish store told me about a customer that was concerned about moving a tank of fish across town, convinced that if it were possible, great losses were inevitable. My friend wanted to share this with me to point out that there is a lot of fear about moving fish; many simply forget that fish are often shipped from around the world to the pet shop in the first place.

I recently accepted a job offer in Colorado, and I was living in Northern California. I had then about 20 tanks of fish, all doing well in a breeding setup with adults, new young and fish growing out. I knew the move overall would be a good one for the fish, once they were settled. I would be gaining a large unfinished basement, and leaving a fishroom that was in a back "mother in law" type house that that would bake in the 100 plus Sacramento summer temperatures. I am a teacher and the move would need to happen over the summer, and as turned out, the fish were taken out to Colorado across the Nevada desert in 103 degree temps!

At first I brainstormed what my options were, and up until shortly before the move assumed that I would cull down to my most "important" fish in each line (the breeders, new young, best looking adolescents) and ship them. I would drive out with the tanks in a rented van, set everything up, and my wife would box them up and send them out. I would receive them and get them established. When it came time to actually do it, the cost was wildly prohibitive. At best, in a standard under 10 lb. box I could get 2-3 trios, and there were nearly a hundred fish to ship...

So here's what happened and the factors that needed to be taken into consideration. When moving fish there are only a few variables that must be watched, otherwise the fish will die, plain and simple. Their being uncomfortable is a given; they will be in new surroundings, with lighting and temperature differences, and probably a lot of movement. Their immunity will be affected from not only the stress of the circumstances required during the move, but as a rule it is also best not to feed them during this process. Water changes and filtration, if they happen, will be haphazard and difficult. The move must happen as quickly as possible. Upon the completion of the move they will be put into new tanks that may not be cycled properly, with a likelihood of water at the new location with different ph, water hardness etc.

Our house was being put on the market, and the quaint charming little back house could not look like a medieval laboratory (as our realtor referred to it), so the racks etc., had to come down. As soon to the date that the movers would arrive I would drive out with the fish to the new house, set them up and return with friends in Colorado taking care of them until my return. There was a period of nearly a month that the fish were put into groups in marked Sterilite containers with filters, etc. in a little quarter basement in Sacramento. When prospective buyers wanted to see the basement we attempted to explain that knowing it was there was enough- there was no need to actually take a look. There were approximately 15 10 gallon white buckets down there with fish in them. All of the tanks and racks, etc. had been taken to a rented storage unit. All but the most essential fish had been given away, sold or culled.

I looked into renting a van, assuming I could put everything- the broken down racks, tanks and white buckets in a big enough van. A trailer was out of the question- the vehicle I used would have to have AC that would keep everything relatively cool, and I would have to be driving whenever the weather was warm, eating in the van, etc. An hour with no AC in the desert heat would certainly cook everything, killing off any fish pretty quickly.

It turned out that renting a van was beyond my means as well- we could nearly have bought new racks and tanks for the same price of a rental van large enough. I fortunately had a friend with a van big enough, but needed to convince him to let me borrow it for a week to drive across country! I agreed to tune it up and fix it up in return for borrowing it for the week it would take to do this. He agreed.

I brought the van home to find that it was not in fact big enough to hold all I had thought it would. Once the tanks and stands were in, with all of the peripheral equipment- lights, pumps, heaters, etc., there was only room for three of the buckets. So everything would need to come back out, and I planned the time I would have to leave. Late the night before, after it had gotten cool I emptied each bucket into one of the tanks- filling each tank about 2 inches. I made sure to use clean water. The fish had not eaten in over 24 hours. I was careful not to overcrowd any particular tank, and accepted that because of the way they would be stacked, I would not be able to access many of the tanks until my arrival. If I had to do it over again I would have sprinkled some ammo chips in the tanks to absorb excess ammonia- but as it turned out, I lost very few fish.

I left early on a Friday morning, and the temperature in the Nevada desert by the time I entered it was well over 100 degrees. I was well aware that even a minor breakdown requiring the fish to sit for more than about 20 minutes without the AC on would quickly overheat the van and wipe out the fish. I found that driving from about 8 in the morning until 7 at night kept the fish at survivable temps. Every noise or slight variation in the AC was cause for concern. Eating was drive through, fuel and rest stops were quick and without turning off the engine, if possible.

It looked like I would arrive late morning on Sunday. I got into the van on Sunday morning in Cheyenne, Wyoming, and the smell that hit me as I opened the door told me that I had a few that weren't going to make the rest of the trip with everyone else. At this point I had to laugh to myself; now I was going to drive this odd cargo with this pungent ammonia smell... I could not see into most of the tanks, and a look at the outer tanks told me that most were still OK, but somewhere things weren't going well, and unfortunately, one dead fish will cause the deaths of everyone else in the same container. I wasn't genuinely concerned, as I figured that if everything had died I could probably have smelled it in my hotel room with the doors closed...

I pulled up to the house about 11 AM on Sunday, 1200 miles after leaving Sacramento, and quickly began to unload the van to assess the casualties. I had two containers that died- 2 of the 3 buckets that did make the trip. It was probably a good thing everything wasn't in buckets. One was of adult X. Nezahualcoyotls, and the other was a container of small plecos. They easily smelled up the entire van- but everything else seemed fine. I did lose a couple- 3 or 4 other fish in the acclimation process, but I felt the move overall was very successful.

I had brought along some closed containers of plain water to add to their "trip water" when I arrived. This was important. Each tank got the equivalent of about 30% fresh water added to their tank. Each 10 gallon tank had about 2 to 3 gallons in it. Every hour I added about 1/2 cup of new tap water from the new location to each tank, keeping an eye on any signs of distress, and proceeded to put the racks together.

Since that trip I have transported fish to and from shows throughout the country, with fish being required to live for up to two weeks without routine filtration and aeration. After an occasion where the water at a hotel room wiped out the majority of the fish I was carrying- and any one of many variables could have accounted for the difference in water quality- I now bring water from home with me in 7 gallon containers. Since using those and providing 30-50% water changes each evening, feeding lightly daily after 4-5 days, I have lost very few fish. On a recent 2 week trip across country from Denver to Cleveland, then New York and back to Denver, bringing nearly 300 fish I lost 4.

As the tanks began to fill during the acclimation process at the new location I put them on the racks and added box filters to provide aeration and water movement. I quit adding water at about 11 that night and let them adjust until the next morning. The next day I then went ahead and filled the tanks up with the new water. I was careful not to move the fish around yet, the less manipulation of them, the better. I set everything up, and let them run for two days- long enough to get a batch of brine shrimp into them, and divided them up into their proper tanks- I had mixed some species that would not interbreed to save space etc.

I took my friends there in Colorado through the steps to keep the fish going until my return, and then drove back to California, hoping that it would not be the last time I would see everything alive! As it turned out, they took very good care of the tanks, even having to deal with one plexiglas tank that split a seam from the stresses of the move. They cleaned everything up and kept on top of it all, with very few fish lost. I have added many more tanks since and a couple more racks, and the move has proven to be as beneficial for the fish as I had hoped.

I did not do many of the things some people recommend, but I also avoided some things that make moves difficult. I did not transport the fish in closed bags- the open tanks provided lots of surface area and the sloshing around provided lots of aeration. Today when transporting fish to shows I use the same open Sterilite containers, stacked inside one another- larger into smaller, which allows for a few inches in each container for the fish to stay safe, comfortable and aerated.

The fish were not fed prior to this 3 day move and did not eat until they were safely in their new tanks with the proper filtration. I was with them the entire time to ensure that the temperature did not get out of bounds, and I made a point of not overcrowding the containers. I did move plants with the fish, and with some thought I should have moved the plants in their own containers separately. But it was not a problem this time. The two containers I did lose had less surface area and contained older or larger fish that were tested by the move the most.

I would hope that I do not need to do this again anytime soon, and can think of many other more pleasurable ways to spend a weekend, but it can be done, and successfully with a little thought and preparation. Commercial suppliers ship fish under fairly

difficult conditions routinely, and it is important to keep in mind that shipping and moving fish is a common procedure. For those of us that know each fish individually it can be just as stressful for us as it is for the fish, but do not feel that it cannot be done!

Greg Sage
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