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# Cichlids

Some of the most interesting and beautiful of freshwater fishes are members of the family *Cichlidae*. They are found predominantly in freshwater lakes and rivers in South and Central America and throughout Africa. Cichlids range from one-inch dwarf species to massive fishes too large for the home aquarium. All are egg-layers, and most cichlid species are protective of eggs and fry. Some even keep them in their mouths for protection! Among the commonly kept species of cichlids are Angelfish, Oscars, Discus, German Rams, Kribensis, and Jewel Cichlids. Most people break cichlids into two camps, African Rift Lake species and South American species. In truth, South American Cichlids are found at least as far north as Texas.

## African Rift Lake Cichlids

There are three great lakes in Africa that these hard-water beauties come from- Lake Malawi, Lake Tanganyika, and Lake Victoria. The most commonly seen African cichlids are the torpedo-shaped “mbunas” from Lake Malawi. When Mbuna’s are fed the proper diet and kept in the right water conditions, the color and beauty can rival that of saltwater fish.

While most of these fishes are vegetarian, they represent some of the most territorial and aggressive fishes in the aquarium trade! They come in a vast array of colors and patterns, and are almost always active. The secret to keeping these fish is to either keep only one or put at least 20 of them in an aquarium 75 gallons or (preferably) larger. Keeping a few of them or in a smaller tank, will almost always lead to systematic kill off starting at the weakest until you are left with either one fish or a pair. Rock work is appreciated, and they will hide much less if plenty of shelter is provided.

The optimal pH for an African Cichlid aquarium is quite high, 8.2pH or even higher for Tanganyikan fishes. The Tanganyikans (or “tangs”) are generally less quarrelsome than Mbuna, and typically don’t fare well when mixed with them. For Mbuna, feed a vegetable pellet diet. I like both *Granugreen* from *Sera* and *Omega One Vegetable Pellets*. I have raised generations of Cichlids on these foods. Never feed Mbuna feeder fish. Though they will eat them, such a diet is terribly unhealthy. Other species have different dietary needs. It would not be possible to cover all of them.

## South American Cichlids

Other Cichlids, or those not originating from the African Rift Lakes thrive best in soft, neutral water. These conditions also apply to some African river species, such as Kribensis and Jewel Cichlids. Again, there is so much variety in these it is impossible to touch on everything here. The Cichlids of the Americas vary from tiny little *Apistos* to *Angelfish* to *Oscars* and much larger “tank busters.”

Do your homework on a species before buying! An Oscar can reach nearly a foot and a half in length and will create a ton of waste. They aren’t a fish for 55 gallon or smaller tanks. Too many of these animals wind up in

30 gallon aquariums and are fed poor diets of low grade pellets and feeder goldfish. Goldfish contain high levels of thiaminase, an enzyme that destroys vitamin B1 and can build up to toxic levels. Large Cichlids such as Oscars are probably second only to the Pacu (or maybe goldfish) as the most abused aquarium fish. I don't even stock them in my store after seeing so many in horrible condition over the years. I will special order them for big fish enthusiasts. To keep a big fish, you need a big tank. Avoid the impulse to buy the fish and assume you'll get a larger tank down the road. They grow FAST! Your small filter, heater and light will be of little use.

### **Mixing the two**

In a nutshell, don't do it. A mature Mbuna will usually shred an Oscar-type Cichlid five times its size. I have sold a number of these and warned customers that these fish will not get along with their established tank mates. Nearly every time the African is returned to me for beating up the larger Cichlid. Also bear in mind that their pH ranges are vastly different. The pH scale is logarithmic, meaning the proper pH for Africans (8.0) is ten times more alkaline than the neutral pH for cichlids of the Americas. While they will live in the wrong pH conditions, it's akin to keeping a fern and a cactus in the same pot –one or both will suffer.

- Chip Bridges