

Community Tanks... Things You Should Know!

By Phil Maznyk KVAS pmaznyk@rogers.com

Most aquarists typically start off with a community tank or create one shortly after being in the hobby for a little while. The allure of a tank full of assorted sized and coloured fish is very appealing. When we think of a community we think of a group of people living in a particular area. Well similarly in the typical community aquarium we have a group of fish living together.



Photo by **Phil Maznyk**

There are many different types of communities. These can be made up of freshwater species from South America, Asia, The New World and even the Great Rift Lakes of Africa. Some people think Biotope when they hear the word community. When you design your community tank you often end up having created a very unique place for your community inhabitants; a 'Biotope'. Translated literally Biotope means an area where life lives. More precisely in the case of aquarists it is an area of uniform environmental conditions providing a living place for a specific group of fish and or plants.

Before you create your community tank it is always wise to do thorough research and planning. A community tank that is properly planned would have inhabitants that typically all reside in the same geographic area, whether it is a river or an inland lake. In the case of a marine community tank, we would be talking

about an ocean. Be wise when purchasing your fish. Proper research will have told you that you will not be just buying your fish simply because they have beautiful colours or nice long fins. Your fish must be compatible!

Sadly many new aquarists fall into this trap by choosing incompatible species and end up regretting it soon thereafter. Incompatibility among both the fish and the aquarium conditions under which they are kept can occur due to lack of knowledge or experience. Not every combination of species even from the same area does well together.

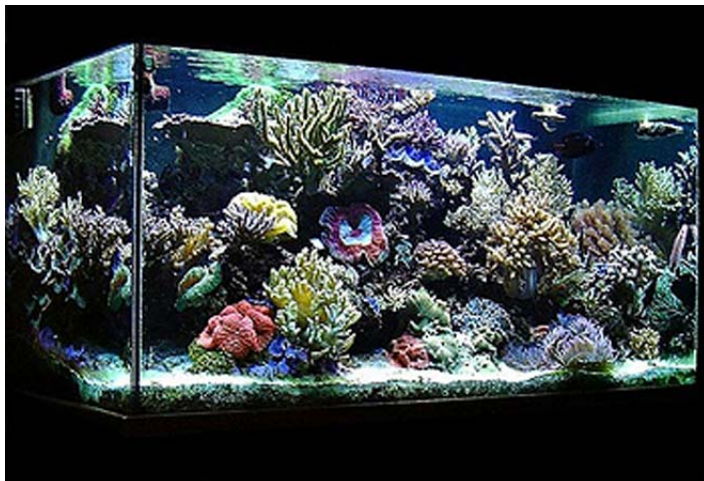


Photo from **Marine Alive**

Many species are quite territorial or will uproot plants and move substrate around to suite their needs. Plan carefully, speak to your LFS and you can help avoid this happening to you!



Photo by **Andrew (KVAS Forum)**

First you need to determine what type of fish you want to inhabit the community. Once you have done this, you then need to know whether they all get along; are the pH requirements similar? do they like bogwood etc? An extreme but true example of incompatibility is trying to

keep Neon tetras with an Arowana. Sure both species can be found in the same geographic region of South America, but both are completely different as far as personalities go. It's simply not going to work! Your beautiful neon tetra's wouldn't last a day much less a few hours. For a community aquarium you can use a tank of any size but the bigger the aquarium is; the less it will be influenced by fish and other elements in it.



Photo by **Cameron Turner**

The water chemistry will also remain much more stable. As your plans come together you'll also want to know if you're going to use live plants or artificial silk and plastic ones. If you're going with live plants then your first priority should be your substrate. As part of your community you want the plants to flourish with your fish.



Photo by **Phil Maznyk**

Seachem Flourite or Carib Sea's Eco-Complete both offer plenty of nutrients for your plants and are commonly used by aquarists with great results. These nutrients will be absorbed by the roots. I personally like the black colour of both these products. You'll need a minimum of 1.5 inches of depth, preferably 2 to 3 inches. While many of the new artificial plants look

very good, there is nothing quite like a heavily planted community tank. Just choose your plants wisely as you get started. You will want fast growing plants at first to help compete with algae. Remember tall plants should go in the rear of the tank and the shorter ones up front. Not only will you be able to see your fish better but by having the taller plants at the rear, it will give your tank good depth perception.



Photo by **Sameer (KWAS Forum Member)**

Next consider placing some driftwood or rock into the tank. Set up any caves or hiding places you want now rather than disturbing things later. Gently slope the substrate so the back of the tank is a little bit higher than the front. This helps allow any left over foods and detritus to drift forward toward the front where it is easier to vacuum them up. Next, add your room temperature water slowly and then at about a foot of depth if you are using plants you can now place them in the tank.

Try and hide any hardware such as heaters, Co2 diffusers (if you chose to use them) and your filter intakes from view now. It's always easier to do this now than trying to do this later. Continue to fill the tank slowly, letting the newly setup community tank settle in. The water should be relatively clear in a few days and you should have your filters running with some fish helping produce ammonia which will in turn help with the tank

cycling process. You can also do the fishless cycle 'however' be careful as some plants do not like the higher levels of ammonia. Once your heaters, filters and CO2 system are running; keep a keen eye on your tank as it cycles. As the tank begins to mature you can now begin to slowly add the fish. The key word here is 'slowly'. Let the bacterial colony mature so it can control the ammonia and nitrates. Your fish and plants will thank you many times in the coming months and years.

Regular water changes and substrate vacuuming are a must. As I mentioned earlier keep a close eye on the water chemistry. If you've chosen live plants it would be wise to also test for phosphates and iron. Test kits are available from your LFS. Choose healthy fish. You want inquisitive fish that come to the front of the glass. If you see any dead fish or sick looking fish in a tank 'avoid' buying any fish from that tank! The occasional torn fin is also not as bad it seems.



Photo by **Zenin Skomorowski**

If you see a tail fin that looks a bit ragged don't disqualify those fish. Fins heal quite quickly. Many stores have high stocking levels in their tanks and inevitably the occasional fin will get nipped. When you bring your new fish home do not just open the bag and dump the water into your tank. Most local fish stores will have instructions on how to introduce new fish to their new home.

It's quite simple, open the bag then carefully float the bag in the tank to allow the water temperature to balance, then using a small cup or similar remove some of the water from the bag and very slowly add your tank water. Just add a little of your tank water at a time. Do

this over a 30 minute period. Doing this helps your new fish adjust to the pH level of their new tank. Then net the fish carefully and let them swim down into their new home. You may not see your new fish for a day or two as they slowly adjust and begin to feel comfortable in their new surroundings. If you're interested in breeding some of your community fish, you will want to pay close attention to the pH requirements of that particular fish.



Photo by **Phil Maznyk**

Many fish will thrive in our tanks but some will require the pH to be very close to their native waters, in order for them to have successful spawns. In the photo above is a mature 135 gallon planted community tank owned by KWA member Robin Pixner. His community consist of 33 fish from several different species. This tank uses DIY CO2, custom lighting and even under gravel heating. Just before this photo was taken Robin had removed nearly half of his real plants to sell at Oktoberfish. This is a great example of a community tank that is thriving! It truly is a remarkable tank to view!

When provided with the proper conditions your fish and plants will show it. If you buy your fish from your LFS then your tap water is likely to be very similar to where you purchased the new fish and they should be just fine when moved into their new tank. Remember to feed very sparingly at first so the fish can get used to the new food that will now become part of their daily feeding. They will likely not eat much at first but hunger will eventually overcome them and they will eat. The **'key to success'** with community tank setups is compatibility, **'especially similarities in the care requirements of your fish and plants'**. This may all seem like a lot of work at first, but the end result will reward you with many years of tank viewing enjoyment ■