

African Cichlid Care Sheet

General Information

Cichlids are a diverse group of freshwater fish from the biological family Cichlidae. There are over a thousand official species and some scientist in the field believe there may be thousands more! They are also known as secondary freshwater fish because their distant relatives originated from the ocean. Cichlids are split into two groups: Central and South American Cichlids or New World Cichlids and African Cichlids. African Cichlids come from three lakes in Africa - Lake Malawi, Lake Tanganyika, and Lake Victoria and are divided up into three main species types; Mbuna, Peacocks, and Haplochromis. The most popular of these cichlids placed in african cichlid tanks come from Lake Malawi.

African Cichlids include some of the most colorful fish money can buy of all freshwater fishes. The cichlids are an enormous family of fish and they offer the widest variety of body shapes and behaviors of all freshwater fishes. This wonderful group is further complimented by their remarkable behavior, it is highly complex yet ritualistic. They are very active and many can be very personable, readily greeting their keepers and begging for food. These fish make for some of the most industrious, active, and interesting fish there are. These are the characteristics that make cichlids a favorite attraction for many hobbyists. They are intriguing to observe and they will entertain you with their intelligence and social behavior.

African cichlids make excellent community fish ONLY WITH THEIR OWN KIND! Mollies, tetras, etc., will never make for good long lasting tank mates. Although a pleco is usually tolerated. They love to excavate and move stuff around to make their environment more suitable for themselves. As a result live plants are not a good idea!

African cichlids take the prize for the largest and smallest cichlids in the world! The largest recorded cichlid is the Boulengerochromis microlepis which reaches up to 36" (90 cm) in length. In contrast there is the Nanochromis transvestitusus, which is the smallest known cichlid and barely reaches over an inch in length!

An African Cichlid Tank in my opinion have always been an underrated aquarium. Usually many hobbyists and pet owners will look to traditional freshwater community or saltwater tanks, but an African Cichlid tank offers a great balance of the ease of a freshwater tank along with the vivid colors of a saltwater aquarium. One of the biggest differentiating factors, especially with Mbuna Cichlids is how incredibly active they are. An African Cichlid tank is a great choice for a beginner and for those who like the color of saltwater fish, but may not feel ready for the cost and additional upkeep of a saltwater aquarium.

Maximum Size

The most common African Cichlid species available from pet stores grow to 4-6 inches, and some get as big as 10-12 inches. This family of fish includes 100s of species with the actual number of african cichlid species is unknown but estimated to be in the thousands.

Water Quality

Water testing is a necessary. Test for high-range pH, ammonia, nitrite, and nitrate. African Cichlids prefer higher pH and temperatures than other freshwater fish.

Temperature 72°-83°F

Lake Malawi species PH: 7.4 – 8.6

Lake Tanganyika species PH: 7.8 – 9.0

Lake Victoria species PH: 7.2 – 8.6

General Hardness: 160 – 320 ppm (for best coloring)

Since all African Cichlids appreciate this higher pH, these are one of the few freshwater species whose aquariums may be decorated with marine coral, sand, and rock which will push the pH and buffer the water. In some instances it may be necessary to buffer water to reach these higher pH levels. We have various Cichlid Buffer additives and Cichlid Salts available in store that can be used.

Tank Setup

If your aquarium has just been recently setup please refer to our 'TANK CYCLING' guide which you can find at BROTHERSPETS.COM under our Petguides tab or you can visit us instore and we'd be more than happy to print you a copy. We also offer free water testing to ensure your tank is ready for fish. This fish can be expensive and we want more than anything for your fish to not only live but thrive in your aquarium.

When it comes to any fish species and aquarium setup, bigger is always better. You will have more water volume to make your tank stable and more room to curb aggression. However, not everyone wants a massive tank. Cichlids do get large and are territorial. The minimum for most African cichlid species is going to be 55 gallons. Longer tanks are better than tall as many cichlids are mid-level or bottom-level swimmers. Always go for a wide vs taller aquarium. Ensure water conditions are set accordingly to the desired ranges.

The absolute key to keeping African Cichlids is to overcrowd your tank to cut down on their naturally aggressive and territorial behaviors. When overcrowding the tank it makes it hard for any fish to have jurisdiction over any one area. This makes it so any fish being chased by another to easily get lost in the crowd of the other fish so that not just one fish is getting constantly picked on until he ends up dead.

Some people insist you can not mix Mbunas, Peacocks, and Haps or even mix fish from different lakes. I mix everything, I've had African Cichlid tanks for many many years and have never had a problem mixing them. With that said you Can Not mix African Cichlids with other fish.

Synodontis Catfish come from the same lakes in Africa and can go with your African Cichlids. Other tankmates I've had success with are Pleco and C.A.E. (chinese algae eaters). I would never recommend any other fish than the few I mentioned.

Filtration

An African Cichlid aquarium needs to be well filtered. Overfiltration is actually encouraged in an african cichlid tank as it is typical to purposely overstock them to curb aggression among tank mates. In addition, Cichlids are messy eaters and even messier excreters. Aeration is also very important since Cichlids require well oxygenated water.

Because of the added demands of African Cichlids, dual filtration is recommend. Dual canister filtration is commonplace for African Cichlid keepers. In larger tanks, an overflow + sump + wet/dry setup is used to handle the bioload and flow requirements of the tank. Your goal is to have 8-10 times gallon per hour flow filtered per hour. So for a 55 gallon tank, you are looking at a goal of 550 filtered gallons per hour from your filtration system. You can be fine with less filtered per hour if you have a high capacity canister, but you may need to supplement flow with powerheads to keep the flow strong in the tank in order to prevent dead spots within the tank.

Water Changes

An African Cichlid aquarium needs more frequent water changes than most fresh water setups due to the overcrowding. Here at Brothers we highly recommend at least a 25% Water Change WEEKLY. We do 35% water change weekly here on all our african cichlid tanks. Be sure to gravel vacuum good too, this is essential to removing fish poo, uneaten fish food, and any other general waste in your gravel or sand.

Don't forget to clean your filtration at least monthly. This will ensure your filter is running at its maximum possible flow and increase the overall life of your filter. Rinse off filter floss, sponges, and bio media. NEVER use any chemicals to clean. Carbon must be replaced every 30 days.

Rock Work and Decor

Rock work is an important consideration and will vary depending on what species of African Cichlids you decide on. For Mbunas and other rock dwelling Africans, you will want to have rocks with lots of holes and crevices. Rocks will cover most of the bottom of the tank for these types of fish. Texas Holey Rock is a good example of such rock. For Haps and Peacocks and other open swimmers, there should be more open water to mimic their environment. Other rocks that you can consider would be slate, limestone, and even ocean rock (base rock) but make sure your rock is more smooth should be considered as rough rock can hurt your African cichlids.

I use many types of decor in my tanks to give it the look I'm going for. You can use any decor you find in most pet stores as long as you give plenty of cave like areas and hiding spots. I do recommend staying away from real driftwood and lava rock because these will naturally lower the PH in you aquarium. I do also steer clear of real and fake plants because most African Cichlids will uproot and demolish plants, but there are several species that would do fine with plants.

Substrates

African Cichlid tanks can benefit from having a sand substrate because this closely mimics their

natural environment. Many Cichlids naturally feed by grazing through the sand, others cleanse their gills, while others dive into it or build nests.

Another substrate available that will benefit African Cichlids is Crushed Coral traditionally used in marine (saltwater) tanks. This is the substrate that I generally use for a few reasons. The first reason I use this is to naturally raise the PH in my aquariums and the second is due to its texture; it holds my rock caves up better and other decor because it is harder for them to move around when they are trying to nest.

Feeding

Diet for your African Cichlids will depend on the type of Cichlids you have. Africans can cross all the food groups (herbivore, carnivorous, omnivores, and micro predators) so it is critical that you know what group your fish belongs to. Spirulina is a general good food to feed all fish since it has outstanding nutritional quality and is made up of 65-70% protein.

Supplemental foods for herbivore fish would be peas, romaine lettuce, and spinach. For carnivorous fish, brine shrimp, shrimp pellets, and krill would be good meat supplements. Fish with yellow, orange, or red will need to be feed foods with lots of pigment so keep their colors optimal.

A stocked Cichlid tank need to be feed frequently, but not overfeed. Maintaining this balance will curb aggression. The recommended would be 3-4 times a day but only what they can eat within 20 seconds or less. Overstocking and overfeeding are the primary reason why we recommended extra filtration for the tank back in the filtration section. Overfeeding can lead to excessive nitrates or bloat for your herbivores. Feed frequent, but do not overfeed. A well feed Cichlid is a less aggressive Cichlid.

Sexing

Similar to a lot of animals in nature, males tend to be more colorful and dominant. The presence of many (Egg Dummies), oval shaped spots on the anal fin, can also help to identify males but isn't always accurate. It is quite difficult to sex small Africans.