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The lazy glide of tropical fish in a colorful aquarium is a glimpse of nature's peace, often in the midst of turmoil.

It is silent, beautiful and carefree.

That's why tropical fish aquariums sometimes grace noisy classrooms, dentists' waiting rooms and lawyers' offices. And, of course, big tanks containing big fish do lend an air of power to an corporate executive's office.

The longstanding relationship between people and fish has made tropical fish the nation's second most popular hobby, behind photography.

One third of the fish swimming in the nation's aquariums were born in Florida. West-central Florida, in particular, is teeming with tropical fish. Sailfish mol-lies, blushing barbs, redbtail sharks and hundreds of other kinds of fish flourish on 300 or so farms across Hillsborough and Polk counties.

Tropical fish farming - the breeding and raising of freshwater and saltwater fish - generates about \$33-million each year. It is Tampa International Airport's largest cargo commodity, and it yields the highest returns per acre of any agricultural crop in the state.

By these barometers, fish farming should be one of Florida's most sanguine industries, right?

Wrong.

The unusually warm temperatures last winter height-ened fish procreation. That, plus slow demand from hobbyists and wholesalers, left Florida's farmers with an abundance of fish in the market. Increased compe-tition from fish farmers in the Far East, who provide most of the world's captive fish, also has depressed fish prices.

And a price war has been raging the last few months. Some are accusing others in the business of acting like barracudas on a feeding frenzy. They say a few of the big farming businesses are out to get the small operations by cutting prices in an already weakened industry.

"Competition is way up, and prices are way down," said Elwyn Segrest, a fish farmer and distributor based in Gibsonton. "The producers set the price, but they're fighting with each other. It's a weird situation that makes no economic sense at all."

It makes perfect sense to David Herrilko, manager of 5-D Tropical Inc., a large Plant City farm that ships and buys fish from smaller businesses. He said lower prices are merely the result of aggressive competition, not a price war.

"This winter sales were flat for everybody except may-be bankruptcy lawyers," he said. "Yet there's a lot of production down here. We need to stimulate business by offering sales . . . Just like Burger King, we need to put the Whopper on sale for 99 cents."

That is tough because the price of most Florida-grown fish hasn't changed much in 15 to 20 years. Twenty years ago, a pink kisser fish fetched 17 cents from wholesalers; today it might cost 18 cents, Herrilko said.

Nevertheless, the tropical fish business has been a fruitful one for most of the 200 full-time and 100 part-time farmers in Florida, as well as for the airlines that serve Tampa International.

Every year the air carriers garner more than \$4-mil-lion from the 6-million pounds of fish (including the packaging and water) leaving Tampa International for wholesalers around the world.

Tropical fish became Florida's forte in the 1930s, with farms in the central and southern parts of the state producing hundreds of home-grown species. The fish were shipped via railroad in large cans. A lot of fish died en route until the 1940s, when some pioneering farmers hired former World War II pilots to fly orders throughout the United States.

"Back then every Ben Franklin or five-and-dime had some sort of tropical fish display," said Bill Dwight, owner of Southern Tropical Fish Hatchery in Lake-land. "Pet stores came into being in the 1960s and 1970s. This created a demand."

Fish farms as far away as Singapore, the Philippines, Hong Kong and other parts of Southeast Asia began meeting that demand, eventually snaring two-thirds of the U.S. tropical fish market. Technological ad-vancements and government assistance helped those farmers out-breed Florida farmers, to the point that U.S. pet wholesalers and farmers now import about \$60-million in tropical fish annually, Herrilko said. Added Dwight, "Florida farmers looked up and saw that not only were they not the only fish suppliers; they were no longer the best suppliers."

Florida farms responded in several ways. Some began buying baby fish from the Far East and raising them to salable size on their farms.

Others became more sophisticated, with some of the half-dozen large farms hiring biologists, engineers and other specialists to improve breeding and develop new varieties of fish.

"Farmers became businessmen," Dwight said. "They learned how to grow fish and become more efficient. Now you have to be accountants and soothsayers to know what is going to sell this year and what sold last

year. Chances are, what didn't sell last year you should grow because it may sell next year, and no one else will be growing it."

Most farmers agree the real money is in breeding varieties not available elsewhere or in specializing in hard-to-breed varieties, such as iridescent sharks, redbtail sharks, and black and red-bellied pacu (a type of seed-eating piranha).

"If you're the first one out the door and can produce in great volume of fish, then you can make a lot of money," said Barbara Hatch, owner of J&B Tropical Fish Hatchery Inc. in Lakeland.

But each variety and species of fish breeds in different ways.

Some fish need to be alone together to mate, while others can spawn in a crowd. Some need a little help from hormones, while others need only to be sepa-rated from the opposite sex for a while to feel spunky. Mouthbreeders, such as African cichlids, keep eggs in their mouths and don't eat for weeks, until the eggs hatch. After the babies hatch, if they're frightened they will swim back into the parent's mouth.

Gouramies lay eggs in a nest of bubbles that the father will defend vigorously, sometimes to the point of kill-ing the mother.

"All fish families have different rules," said Timothy K. Hennessy, president and co-owner of Ekk Will Water-life Resources, one of the state's largest hatcheries.

Fish farmers selectively breed their stock, trying for varieties with unusual or bright coloring or with wide or long, flowing tails and fins. Often, the more un-usual a fish's color scheme and fins, the more valuable it is to wholesalers and hobbyists, Hennessy said.

Common rosy barbs may cost 12 cents each on the wholesale market, but rosy barbs bred with high fins cost 25 cents, and those with neon coloring cost 35 cents. Retail prices are usually nine to 10 times the wholesale cost.

Mother Nature wouldn't breed fish that way, said Hennessy. If a fish had long fins it would swim too slowly to get away from predators, and if its colors were too bright it might attract unwanted attention, he said.

Wild or farm-grown, fish come in a host of varieties and colors. For instance, Hennessy estimates there may be more than 2,000 known varieties of catfish.

Cichlids, a general class of fish originally captured in the lakes of Africa, have been bred in captivity with 500 or more wondrous colors and patterns. There are yellow ones with black stripes, deep blue ones with or without stripes, gray ones with black stripes, gold ones with pinkish fins and tails, and others.

In Ekk Will's breeding vats - which actually are con-verted burial vaults - 6,000 pairs of fish breed 2-mil-lion to 5-million babies each week. Ekk Will breeds about 150 kinds of fish and sells more than 1,000 varieties, shipping them to wholesalers. Its chief rival, 5-D, breeds 250 varieties and ships about 3,000 vari-et-ies.

Only a handful of farmers are large enough to ship nationwide to wholesalers. Most farms are family-owned outfits that specialize in a few species, which they sell to large shipper-farms.

Overall, the 1980s were good to big and small farms alike, with most experiencing double-digit increases in sales.

Official sales figures show that tropical fish farm-ers generated \$21.7-million in annual sales in 1987. (Tropical fish officially became an agricultural prod-uct in Florida in 1986.) In 1989, when the last state survey was conducted, sales at fish farms amounted to \$33.7-million - more than all other forms of aquacul-tural farming in the state combined.

"People a few years ago thought nothing of spending \$300 to \$400 on video games, but they realized that they can go buy a fish tank for \$50, and the kids will get just as much pleasure from it," Southern Tropical's Dwight said.

Several studies documenting the calming effects of gazing at tropical fish also boosted the aquarium busi-ness, as did changes in office decor.

"That's why you see aquariums in dentists' waiting rooms and lawyers offices," Hennessy said. "And we got a lot of yuppies with power tanks in their offices." But the freeze of Christmas 1989 changed all that. Some farmers lost 80 percent or more of their fish, which are kept in outdoor ponds with just a sheet of plastic covering.

Then last winter's warming temperatures led to an oversupply, because many spawning fish procreated more prolifically than usual. The higher prices imme-diately after the freeze also made farmers overconfi-dent about selling the extra stock, farmers said.

"The farmer is usually the last to know that demand is outstripping supply," Dwight said. "But they're the first to know when demand is not enough for supply." Unlike previous post-freeze years, when high demand for tropical fish kept prices high, prices have been declining, and sales were flat last year and this year. In addition to the industry's price war, Hennessy blames the slump on the recession and the Persian Gulf war. "People spent more time in front of their TVs than their fish tanks," he said.