

# *A re Tropheus Difficult?*

By Klaus Steinhaus (reprinted from the June 2007 issue of "Buntbarsche Bulletin", Journal of the American Cichlid Association)

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There have been many articles written about these fish, many good ones and also a few bad ones. However, I felt compelled to write this article because I still sense a lot of bad vibes when it comes to these beautiful cichlids. Many hobbyists still feel scared of giving them a try because the reputation they have is not the best.

When talking to my fellow cichlid lovers, the answers I get are usually the same: "They are way too difficult to keep" or "They are way too expensive". Another argument is "I would like a nice community tank". Well, with this article I will try to remove some of these arguments and fears. OK, I admit suffering from the "Tropheus Syndrome" because I am a Tropheus nut. Since keeping my first group in the mid 1970's, I have been fascinated with the behavior of them, their social structure and their liveliness. A tank full of Tropheus is never boring to me. So please, take this article with a "grain of salt" because it's hard for me to stay impartial.



*Tropheus duboisi* "Kigoma" – photo by Klaus Steinhaus

These fish have been around for quite some time. Discovered by J.E.S. Moore in 1896, and described two years later by George Boulenger, Tropheus did not get into our aquariums until 1956. The first variant to make it was Tropheus sp. "Rutunga", and from that time on the cichlid hobby has never been the same. Very few cichlids had the ability to turn our hobby upside down like the Tropheus. The only one coming to mind is the discus.

The prices we had to pay for these fish were astronomical 35 years ago, but that did not stop us cichlid nuts from buying them.

At the time, knowledge about *Tropheus* was still fairly limited as to their dietary requirements and behavior, and so a lot of hobbyists' dreams literally went down the toilet.

Much has changed since then due to the research and observations of people like Ad Konings, Peter Schupke, Wolfgang Staeck and many others. We now know what to feed them and what to stay away from. We know that we need to keep them in larger groups and not to disturb their social structure.



*Tropheus* sp. "Katonga" – photo by Klaus Steinhaus

Now I am far away from being an "expert", but having kept these fish for over 30 years, I have learned many things the hard way. This article is strictly based on my experience and will hopefully help somebody else to save a lot of grief and money.

OK, let's get to it. The first thing I tell anybody who has never kept *Tropheus* is that they are much easier to keep than many other cichlids. That is a fact and has been proven many times over. To keep any fish, you have to obey some rules. No difference here.

There are several things to consider before you go out and buy yourself some *Tropheus*:

Do you have enough time to look after them properly? *Tropheus* are happiest with a set regimen like the same feeding time each day and at least one 40% water change weekly. You should watch them every day at feeding time and look for any unusual behavior.



*Tropheus* sp. "Cape Nundo" (Golden Chisanse)  
– photo by Klaus Steinhaus

Do you have enough space for your new beauties? *Tropheus* can be quite aggressive and need to be kept in groups of at least 12-15 specimens. That requires a tank of 65 gallons as an absolute minimum. It would be better to start with a group of 18-20 specimens in a 90 gallon or 100 gallon tank to give them the necessary swim room they need and to spread the aggression.

Do you know which *Tropheus* variant you would like to keep? My recommendation is to start with a group of 15 -20 juvenile *Tropheus* "Duboisi" of about 1½" – 2" in size and let them grow up together. This will pretty much guarantee you a good functioning group.

Do you want a species only tank or a community tank? What type of filtration will you use? *Tropheus* need clean water to thrive and stay healthy, so good filtration is a necessity.

Once you have made up your mind on these items, the fun part begins. Get your tank set up and cycled. Don't rush (I know it's not easy to be patient). Give the tank some time to develop into a healthy environment. Watch the water parameters like nitrite, nitrate, pH and hardness.

As for the decoration of a *Tropheus* tank, well people have different opinions and tastes. I like to offer my fish an environment that is as close as possible to their natural habitat.



*Tropheus* sp. "Nangu" – photo by Klaus Steinhaus

I absolutely hate bare tanks because they only serve the purpose of the owner and not the fish. Some sand or fine gravel will do just fine as substrate.

For the rock structure, I like to use limestone pieces as large as I can get into the tank and build it in the two corners right up to the surface. Large rocks have several advantages. They make the tank look larger and more natural, plus you only have to take out a few rocks to catch a holding female. Just make sure that your rocks are stacked securely.

The next item to discuss is food. *Tropheus* are herbivorous cichlids that live along the rocky shoreline where the sun is capable of penetrating the clear water, helping to produce an algae layer on the rocks. This layer is usually covered with sediment due to the constant surf. This sediment covered algae layer is called "aufwuchs" and represents the natural food source for our *Tropheus*. Since it is impossible to recreate this aufwuchs layer under aquarium conditions, we have to find a substitute that comes close and that is where opinions differ.

I have tried many types and brands of food and have found that a good spirulina flake works best for me. However, the variety of food being offered these days is immense



*Petrochromis trewawasae* – photo by Klaus Steinhaus

and sometimes a bit confusing for a newcomer to our hobby. I know of a number of people that feed small pellets exclusively and their fish are doing well too. I have tried these pellets with my fish without success so I keep feeding the flake because my fish seem to like it better.

The statement that Tropheus have to be kept in species only tanks is, in my opinion, misleading and not correct. Yes, it is the best and easiest way to keep these cichlids, but it is not an absolute must. The problem is to find other species that will match their dietary requirements and their temperament. The good thing is that we have a very nice and interesting selection of possible tank mates available to us. Petrochromis, Tanganicodus, Eretmodus and Spathodus species are ideal company for our Tropheus. Simochromis & Pseudosimochromis would also fit the requirements nicely.

I have also seen many hobbyists keeping different Tropheus variants together in the same tank. This practice is something to be very careful with. It is my goal to keep any species I maintain pure, meaning to keep them as they are in nature. By keeping different variants together you give them the chance to interbreed and produce hybrids that eventually will get out to other hobbyists. However, there are some combinations where the possibility of interbreeding is fairly minimal. Some examples are Duboisi / Moorii or Duboisi / Brichardi or Moorii / Brichardi. I too have at times used one of these combinations due to space restraints for a short time period and have had no problems, but there is never a 100% guarantee. Given the right circumstances, they will interbreed.



Eretmodus cyanostictus – photo by Klaus Steinhaus

Breeding these cichlids is not a very difficult task. Conditioning the females seems to create the only problem. The actual breeding is the same as all mouth brooders.

A Tropheus female usually breeds about 4–6 times per year and their clutch size is very small. Anywhere from 5–15 fry per spawn is a common result. The fry, after being held by the female for about 4 weeks, are already 10–12 mm in size and look like completely finished miniature Tropheus. They will stay close to the female and she will take them back into her mouth if threatened.

In closing, I would like to say to all cichlid lovers that have not had the pleasure of maintaining these beautiful fish: "Don't be afraid of them. They are much easier to keep than you think, and the only real danger is that you too will catch the "Tropheus Syndrome" and get hooked on these amazing cichlids".