

The Straight Scoop on Plecostomus

Plecostomus or Hypostomus plecostomus belong to the family Loricariidae. Loricariidae means armored catfish named so because the armor-like longitudinal rows of scutes that cover the upper parts of their bodies. This armor is actually composed boney platelets as opposed to the scales that are normally associated with fish.

Plecostomus are native to Central and South America. The name plecostomus refers to a single species of what are known as common algae eaters. This statement is scientifically accurate but somewhat misleading. There are over 50 officially classified species of armored catfish native to this region of the world. The species name plecostomus has evolved to encompass all of the algae eaters in the family Loricariidae because of their similarity in appearance. This unofficial grouping is further shortened to plecos or simply plecs by aquarium hobbyists.

These fish will actively seek out and eat algae at the microscopic level before it has a chance to develop into a cleaning and maintenance problem. It is little wonder that they have become one of the all time favorite among freshwater aquarists. The fact that they look like a throwback from the era of dinosaurs undoubtedly contributes to their global appeal. Their presence on Earth does indeed predate the emergence of mammals. A prehistoric fish that helps keep you aquarium squeaky clean, what more could an aquarium owner ask for?

One of the most readily distinguishable traits of algae eaters is their wide, suction-cup like mouths. This is a highly specialized feeding apparatus for what in essence is a bottom dwelling scavenger fish. In addition to its most obvious application, this suction mechanism's secondary function can best be demonstrated by watching a plecos cling seemingly effortlessly to the side of an aquarium. This same ability helps to keep these fish anchored securely in place in the most torrential floodwater run offs the rainy season has to offer. A plecos will emerge from even the most severe rainy season in the feeding grounds it has become accustomed to, where other less adaptable species have been swept countless miles downstream. Their distinctive and highly developed mouths have also won them the nickname, suckermouth.

The name plecostomus applies to a single species of armored catfish. This is a very large fish and should only be housed in an aquarium of adequate size. The terms plecostomus, plecos, and algae eater, on the other hand, have become generic labels in the aquarium trade industry. They encompass a variety of Loricariids all of which are breeds of armored catfish. The adult size of these individual species varies considerably. This information is usually included as part of the product description both on the internet and in local retail stores. If the information is not present, ask. Choosing the right size maintenance fish for the right size aquarium will save you from future headaches down the road. Some species will only grow to a maximum length of two inches while other will out grow a small aquarium before you know what happened.

Armored catfish are excellent additions to any community tank. They are bottom dwellers by nature. Bottom dwellers as a rule tend to ignore the activities of their fellow tank mates. When they venture up from their substrate domain to clean the interior walls of your aquarium they will remain focused on the task at hand rather than the fish swimming passed them.

When it comes to the bottom of an aquarium, the plecos is king of its turf. Most armored catfish species are highly territorial. Of course this can be said for the vast majority of bottom dwellers. It is inadvisable to try to keep more than bottom dweller in an aquarium. Younger plecos may be tolerant of each other but as they continue to grow in both age and size that tolerance usually proves short lived. There are very few bottom dwelling fish that will peacefully coexist with one another.

Armored catfish are nocturnal by nature. They feed at night and rest during the day. If your aquarium has rock work or hollow decor the plecos will pick a spot to call home. This is where he will spend his days, out from under the bright aquarium lights. If you are not considerate enough to provide your aquatic friends with adequate hiding place a plecos will settle down on the bottom of the aquarium to sleep until it is time to awake and start foraging.

One of the common misconceptions about plecos is that they live on algae. This is understandable given the amount of time they spend hanging off of aquarium walls. It is also incorrect. Loricariids are scavenger fish. Scavengers survive by feeding on the decomposing organic matter left behind from a well balanced ecosystem. Hence the term bottom feeder.

Plecos are one of the most self sufficient fish you can have in an aquarium. This is easy to take for granted. It is inadvisable to assume that foraging will provide your plecos with enough nutrients to keep it healthy and fit. This is especially true if you own a larger member of the plecos family.

A good way to insure that your plecos' dietary needs are being meant is to incorporate sinking pellets or wafers into your feeding routine. Common table vegetables provide an excellent source of plant matter. They will take readily to leafy vegetables such as lettuce and cabbage. They will also consider more dense veggies like zucchini, cucumbers, and broccoli a tasty treat. Having drift wood in your aquarium is a great way to add fiber to their diet.

Plecos are not known to spawn in captivity. Most species that do not breed in captivity are captured to support the thriving aquarium industry. This is typically not the case when it comes to plecos. Central and South America natives have turned the harvesting of plecos eggs into an industry all its own. The eggs are collected from drying streams and riverbeds and then sold to fish farms where they are hatched and raised for eventual resale. Many plecos sold in fish stores were harvested just this way.

About the Author

A pleco is a beneficial addition to any [freshwater aquarium](#). They help keep both algae and nitrate levels in check for you. To read up about the world's favorite [freshwater aquarium fish](#) go to our online fish guide.

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