

Aquatic jewels

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Varieties of Angelfish

A myriad shades and vibrant mosaics swirl hither and thither designing psychedelic patterns in the water. The seemingly endless names, Red Coral, Neon Blue, Kumara Sunray amongst them, are alien, yet stir curiosity. With close to 70 varieties, many of these fresh water fish are bred and harvested at the Orna Fish farm for export. Beyond the pleasing aesthetics of these ornamental fish, here was the nitty gritty of the industry, perfected right down to an exacting and precise science.

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Thirty two varieties of Guppies – they are not the simple fish that one would have imagined. Instead they come not only in exotic colours and patterns but equally fanciful names befitting their appearance. Flame, Blond Red, Neon Blue and Green Cobra occupy an extensive list of pedigrees at the farm and as one can imagine are named aptly. While Guppies form 78 percent of the exports, others among the fresh water fish are Swordtails, Platies, Mollies, Tetras and Angels, each turning out in a range of varieties at the farm. Shoals of fish in vibrant blues, reds or startling yellow swarm the many ponds beckoning a closer look.

Begun in 1994 Orna Fish has been in operation for the past 18 years and possesses the intricate know-how of rearing ornamental fish. Catering primarily to Germany, closely followed by UK and France, the demand for these dainty varieties have extended to other countries in the European region such as Italy, Poland, Netherlands, Austria, Latvia and Ireland as well. It is all about quality and continuity in production that follows an exhaustive cycle which can be observed at the farm.

The main farms are situated in the vicinity of Ingiriya at Handapangoda and Ellagawa. In these facilities are where all except Mollies – which are grown elsewhere – follow an almost militant sequence starting from small fry at the nursery to mature or exportable sizes that vary with each species. Across the acreage sequential series of ponds have been allocated for back up stocks, parent stocks, nurseries, growing and quarantine prior to exporting.

Of the Guppies, the striking Neon Blue lays claim to the highest demand due to its

arresting colour and distinct glow in direct lighting. Particularly in the case of Guppy varieties the males display the vibrant colours and patterns whereas the females are of inky black bodies and coloured tails. Another popular variety is the vivid and bulbous Red Coral Platy. At a glance it is apparent which of these varieties are swordtails with its sharply extended tail. Some others have been named for their unmistakable eye catching traits such as the Dalmation for its black spots, Mickey Mouse for the tail bearing a curious yet unmistakable black imprint of a mickey mouse head, and the Golden Cobra for the intricate cobra markings on both its body and graceful willowy tail. All in all each variety is endowed with artful patterns that make these fresh water fish aesthetically pleasing.

The fish take a period of 90-100 days to grow and accordingly the ponds have been allocated and numbered to follow a 'vicious cycle' to reach the desired number and quality for weekly exports. The ponds flagged green are ready for harvesting the following day which are then subjected to a tedious task of sorting by size, and separating discards. The fish are quarantined for 48-72 hours in the packing room and the entire sequence involves an avalanche of data that boggles the mind. Nevertheless the results are the upkeep of pedigree and diverse varieties.

To ensure the continuity, parent stocks are replaced every six months in case of the Guppies and nine months for other varieties. Introducing a new breed is no easy task and to develop a pedigree takes up to ten years. The Kumara Sunray is just such a breed developed inhouse, and bears the namesake of its creator, a long standing employee at Orna Fish. The latter name is as its tail radiates a dazzling pattern akin to the rays of the sun. This breed has been further developed to gain a golden head and is aptly named the Golden Kumara Sunray – a popular member in the exports list. Orna Fish also exports marine fish and invertebrates which are collected from the sea with hand nets and quarantined for one week prior to export. Furthermore, aquatic plant varieties are tissue cultured, propagated naturally and grown to exportable quality at the farm. Varieties of Aponogeton, Bacopa, Cryptocoryne and Hyrdophilla are amongst 166 varieties grown for export.

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With the emergence of the farm, communities in the area have been absorbed into the farm's various functions. At present 100 families have found livelihoods as outgrowers and direct suppliers to the farm. Bank loans are provided to the families

to construct tanks, install nets that keep off predators and are further trained in technical know-how. As a result a culture of home-based self employment has developed with many housewives in the area engaged in tending to the fish. Weekly visits are conducted to inspect the growing aspects and quality of fish which are brought to the Orna Fish farm and kept for ten days prior to export. In and around the farm simple systems have been employed such as sea shells dipped in the ponds to increase the hardness and buffer the Ph of the water, regular cleaning of ponds with slake lime or simply drying in sunlight. From little fingerlings to the vibrant tropical diversity that they become, be it a graceful Swordtail, zesty Guppy Calico or captivating Angels, these ornamental fish are indeed more than a sight to behold.

Needless to say much expertise and trained personnel are a constant demand. The regimental upkeep can be attributed to the tireless dedication of Srilal Samarasekara, Managing Director of Orna Fish and the team. Orna Fish is a subsidiary of Euroscan Exports and is an initiative pioneered by Anselm Perera, Managing Director of Euroscan Exports and Mlesna. What initially began as his hobby has evolved with his first design of the farm and today continues to hold a firm niche in the export market.

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