



## OBITUARY

# HERBERT R AXELROD

## THE KING OF AQUARIUM FISHES

Herbert R Axelrod passed away in his Swiss home - aged 89 years in May 2017. He led an amazing life, and was **a legend in the aquatic world** since the early 1960's - being the foremost authority on tropical fish in our lifetime.

His knowledge of aquarium fish had him befriend many famous people over the years including Emperor Hirohita of Japan, Winston Churchill and King Leopold II of Belgium.

I got to know Herb in the mid 1960's when I was collecting marine fish in New Guinea, and authored a number of articles for his Tropical Fish Hobbyist magazine on native New Guinea species and fish collecting. He offered me the opportunity to come to the USA and work with the head breeder at his commercial fish farm – Gulf Fish Farms in Palmetto - Florida, at that time the world's largest tropical fish farm. I spent a year of my life there – and as you can imagine for a fish mad 20 year old, it was some experience. At the time I was there the farm was turning out over 10's of millions of fish and importing

100's of millions a year. Breeding concentrated on egg laying cichlids, egg scatterers like the Tetras and Danio's and nest builders like Betta's and Gourami's.

Despite authoring dozens of major books on tropical fishes, his interest also ran to classical music – being patron of the New Jersey Philharmonic Orchestra and owner of several Stradivarius violins over the years. He spoke 7 languages - was considered a world authority on fly fishing, pigeon breeding and was an expert golfer. It was said that as a 10-year-old he swam the 15 miles across Lake Ontario. He was the world's leading aquatic photographer, owning a collection of over 10,000 fish species photos taken by himself.

But it was in the world of fish that he became famous. It was said he could recognize over 7000 fish species at sight, he led over 40 expeditions into remote areas of the globe seeking new species, discovering hundreds that had been lost to science for many years. More than two dozen species were named after him – the most famous of all being the Cardinal Tetra (Cheirodon Axelrodi), which he claimed he discovered with the help of a priest in the upper reaches of the Amazon River. His TFH Publications not only published hundreds of books on fish, but also on all types of pets as the years went on.

His most famous book "Tropical Aquarium Fishes" sold over 450,000 copies.

He also teamed up with some of the world's other great tropical fish experts, including my good friend Professor Cliff Emmen's, Head of Veterinary Science at Sydney University and author of "How to keep and Breed Tropical Fish", to write many co-authored books over the years.

After he sold the TFH company for \$ 70 Million dollars – he planned to continue fish search for new species and become a philanthropist. He was awarded citizenship of Austria due to his donations to museums in Vienna, and the president of Brazil, Humberto Castelo Branco asked Axelrod to draw up a conservation plan for the Amazon basin. He became a major donator to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington D.C. over the years.

Despite a life that became difficult in later years – his legend in the aquarium world will never be surpassed. He was loved and loathed by his peers in the aquarium industry – making as many enemies as he did friends. His many books were criticized by many for being short of the correct information – not a surprise when on one occasion to please a publisher he churned out a 300 page book on tropical fishes in 36 hours. However, he was widely regarded as the world's best and most prolific photographer of tropical fish species – and many of his images have been used universally in reference and text books.

He will long be remembered – I found him to be impatient, impulsive and not to tolerate fools lightly. He once refused to meet Jacques Cousteau because he considered him to be a bore. He could be a great friend and a bad enemy – suing many and being sued as well on hundreds of occasions. ■

*Frank Williams*