

Piranhas



Piranhas are a tropical freshwater species which normally grows to between 15-25cm in length, however individuals have grown up to 40cm in length.

They are normally found in the Paraguay, Guiana and Amazonian river systems. But they have been found all over the United States and Europe; they are thought to have been released from home aquariums.

Piranhas are not strictly carnivorous, they all eat vegetable matter at some point in their lives.

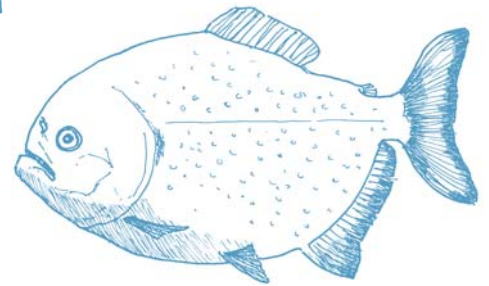
The myth of the ferocious piranha can in part be attributed to President Theodore Roosevelt in his 1914 book 'Through the Brazilian Wilderness'. He described horrifying incidents with piranhas. However he didn't know that the schools of piranhas which he saw strip a cow, had been trapped and were starving so when food was presented to them they went into a feeding frenzy.

Piranhas have an amazing sense of smell, they can smell one drop of blood in 200litres of water, when a few more drops of blood are added they start actively searching for the food source.

Piranhas can produce a croaking or buzzing sound, depending on the species, by resonating sound through their air bladder.

Piranhas are short-sighted!

Many piranhas will just take a bite out of another fish's fins or scales rather than eat the whole fish; the fins are between 35-85% protein so are very nutritious and grow back so the piranha can have another go in a few weeks!!



The colour of the piranha is not determined by the colour of the scales, the colour is caused by the chromatophores (pigment containing cells) into which the scales are embedded. Sunlight stimulates the cells to make them produce colour, but during the mating season the fish becomes very dark, they also lose colour intensity with age.

Piranhas just use their teeth to cut and bite their food, they never chew. This allows them to eat very quickly, which does mean that when they eat during a feeding frenzy the food disappears very quickly!

It is thought that piranhas swim in large shoals to protect themselves against predators, like dolphins, larger fish and birds. They become less stressed when they are part of a larger group.

Piranhas teeth average 4mm in length but can rarely be seen as they are hidden behind their thick lips.

They replace their teeth throughout their lifetime, they shed them in quarters. So, for example, they will lose the bottom left side, then top right side. This means that they will only be toothless in one area of their mouth at any one time. The new teeth grow within a few days as they are all prepared in the gums before the old ones fall out.