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BOOK TALK

Meet the World's Most Expensive Pet Fish

One woman risked terrorists, headhunters, and the 'fish mafia' to see an Asian arowana in the wild.

ENLARGE

The Asian arowana, also known as the dragon fish, is believed by the Chinese to bring good luck and prosperity due to its red color and coin-like scales.

COURTESY OF EMILY VOIGT, QIAN HU CORPORATION

By **Simon Worrall**

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Emily Voigt had no idea that she would be pulled into a world of shady deals and smuggling when she began investigating the Asian arowana, the world's most expensive aquarium fish. Traveling to 15 countries, she braved headhunters and civil war to follow the trail of a fish that is often transported under armed guard. On the way, she discovered the lure of the wild—and the dangers of obsession, as she reveals in her book *The Dragon Behind the Glass: A True Story of Power, Obsession, and the World's Most Coveted Fish*.

When National Geographic caught up with her by phone at her home in New York, she explained how a well-meaning conservation effort to protect the arowana paradoxically increased its attractiveness to collectors; how her search for the arowana took over her life; and why putting a fish in a tank is part of our innate desire to connect with other species.

COURTESY OF SIMON & SCHUSTER

At the center of your story is a fish most of us aren't familiar with. Tell us about the arowana—aka the dragon fish—and why it has become so valuable.

The Asian arowana is the world's most expensive aquarium fish. It is a tropical freshwater fish from Southeast Asia that grows three feet long in the wild. That's roughly the size of a snowshoe. *[Laughs.]* It is a fierce predator dating back to the age of the dinosaurs. It has large, metallic scales, like coins; whiskers that jut from its chin; and it undulates like the paper dragons you see in a Chinese New Year's parade. That resemblance has spawned the belief that the fish brings good luck and prosperity, which is why it has become a highly sought-after aquarium fish.

When I attended the Aquarama International Fish Competition, which is a bit like the Westminster dog show for fish, these 10 rare, albino arowana showed up with a police motorcade, protected by armed guards, to prevent anyone adding poison to the tanks. The highest price I have heard [for a single fish] is $300,000, which supposedly sold to a high-ranking member of the Chinese Communist Party.

You say, "The dragon fish is the most dramatic example of a uniquely modern paradox—the mass-produced endangered species." Unpack that idea for us.

This took me a while to understand. It is illegal to import arowana into the U.S., but in recent years almost two million of them have been moved across international borders. The farms in Southeast Asia where they are produced are like high-security prisons with concrete walls protected by guard dogs, watchtowers, and barbed wire. All for a fish! *[Laughs.]*

Only a few Asian arawana survive in the wild, deep in the jungles of Borneo. Most are raised on fish farms, like this one belonging to Kenny Yap's Qian Hu Corporation in Singapore.

COURTESY OF QIAN HU CORPORATION

It's a dramatic example of a paradox where the fish is largely depleted in the wild but is being bred by the hundreds of thousands each year on farms. The history of this one single fish encapsulates the history of modern conservation. In the 1970s, when the international community began to organize around the idea of protecting endangered species, the impulse was to ban [the trade in] everything. This is what happened with the Asian arowana. Back then it was just an ordinary food fish, something people were eating for dinner in the swamp. It wasn't even considered a particularly good food fish. It's bony and bland. But it is an apex predator and a slow-reproducing fish, so it ended up on this list of protected species and was banned from international trade. That backfired, though, because it created the perception of rarity, which spawned a market for this fish in the aquarium trade. It became a hot commodity.

Your journey begins in an unlikely place—the Bronx. Talk about John Fitzpatrick and New York's illegal wildlife trade.

[Laughs.] Lt. John Fitzpatrick, pet detective! I was doing a story on the exotic pet trade in New York City and called him up one summer afternoon. He started to regale me with stories I couldn't believe: 1,300 turtles living in a swank Tribeca loft, where the guy had no room for a bed; a Harlem man living with a tiger and an alligator in the same little apartment!

I accompanied Fitzpatrick up to the South Bronx because a man had been trying to sell his alligator on Craigslist. *[Laughs.]* We didn't find the alligator but Lieutenant Fitzpatrick kept talking about these illegal, super-expensive pet fish that were coming into the city and were the bane of his existence. At first, I was not interested. I am not a fish person. I thought of pet fish as a boring subject. Then I started digging into it deeper.

You write, "The human species is unique in its compulsion to tame and nurture nearly all other vertebrate creatures." Why do people keep pet fish?

This was a central mystery for me. Not just why the Asian arowana was so incredibly valuable, but what compels us to put a fish in a bowl in the first place? It touches on what E.O. Wilson wrote about biophilia, our innate desire to connect with other animals. I never felt compelled to keep an arowana myself, but I did become obsessed with finding the fish in the wild. It overturned my life for a number of years. I traveled through 15 countries in pursuit of this fish. That obsession came from the same place as the drive to keep aquarium fish. It was a desire to connect with the wild.

That's a perfect cue for one of the book's most colorful characters. Introduce us to Kenny the Fish.

When I first began to research the Asian arowana, one name kept coming up: Kenny the Fish, aka Kenny Yap. He is the kingpin at the center of the glamorous world of Asian aquaculture. He is the owner of one of the largest ornamental fish farms in Asia and notorious in Singapore for posing nude behind intricately placed aquatic pets. *[Laughs.]* When I showed up at his farm he was seated behind a pink and turquoise desk under the inevitable photographs of him posing nude with strategically placed pet fish. *[Laughs.]*

Kenny "the Fish" Yap, shown here swimming in one of his breeding ponds, is "the kingpin at the center of the glamorous world of Asian aquaculture," says author Emily Voigt.

COURTESY OF QIAN HU CORPORATION

Kenny is responsible for the sexy makeover of that industry and is beloved for that reason. I had heard a lot about the dark underbelly of this trade. When I asked Kenny about the wave of fish robberies that had been sweeping the region, he said, "I don't know what you're talking about. Stealing a fish is not as easy as stealing a piece of jewelry."

Another key character in the story is an American ichthyologist named Tyson Roberts. Tell us a bit of his life story.

He's a very special person. I call him the grand old man of ichthyology because he's probably killed and pickled more species of fish than anyone else alive. His mind is extraordinary. When you enter into a conversation with Tyson, you're sucked into these strange hairpin turns and curves. He is now in his mid-70s but still travels all over the globe. Sometimes he'll fall off the grid for many months at a time. At one point in the book, I wasn't even sure that he was still alive.

In a way, he is an endangered species himself. Up to the middle of the 20th century, biologists used to specialize in one animal group. You had people who studied fish or birds or earthworms. But after the molecular revolution and the discovery of the structure of DNA, biology began to be sliced in a different way. Molecular biology came to monopolize funding, while experts on groups of organisms were gradually pushed out. As a result, we're losing a tremendous amount of knowledge. When the current generation dies, there will be no experts left for many groups of organisms.

Your search eventually focuses in on the legendary "Super Red" arowana in Borneo. Describe your misadventures trying to reach the remote lake of Sentarum.

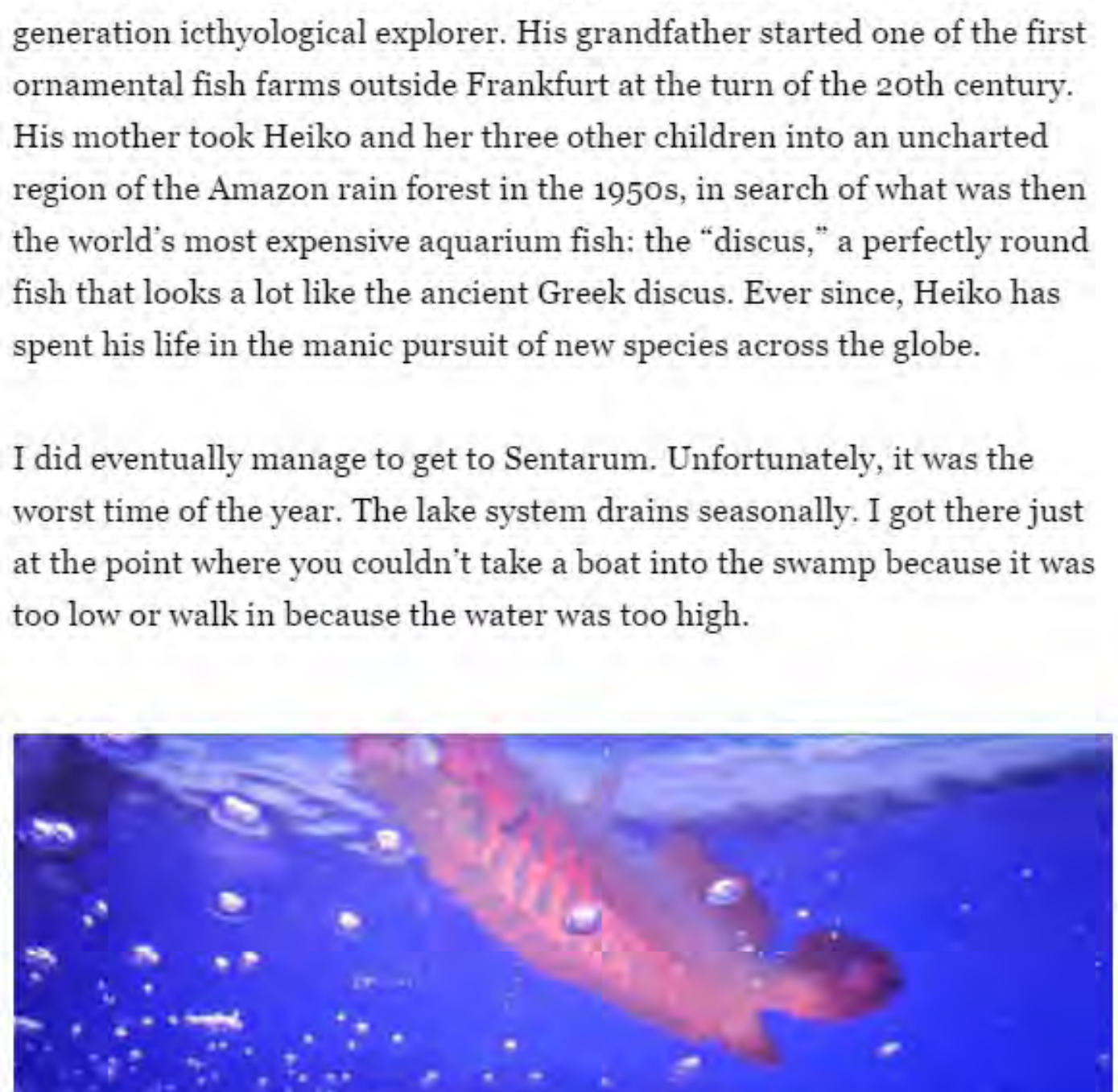
[Laughs.] It started with a six-week deep dive into the fish world. At the end of that, I cancelled my flight home from Asia and risked missing my own wedding reception because I was so determined to get to this fish in the heart of Borneo. I was warned of a trifecta of bogeymen: a supposed fish mafia, Islamic terrorists, and the Iban, who inhabit the lake region and are traditionally headhunters.

Heiko Bleher, known as "the Indiana Jones of the tropical fish world," travels the world in search of new fish species.

PHOTOGRAPH BY EMILY VOIGT

I was probably one of the least well-equipped people to go find a fish on my own, much less the elusive arowana. I had never been fishing a day in my life. I didn't speak the language or have any wilderness experience. *[Laughs.]* Luckily, I got help from someone called Heiko Bleher, who is known as the Indiana Jones of the tropical fish world. He's a third-generation icthyological explorer. His grandfather started one of the first ornamental fish farms outside Frankfurt at the turn of the 20th century. His mother took Heiko and her three other children into an uncharted region of the Amazon rain forest in the 1950s, in search of what was then the world's most expensive aquarium fish: the "discus," a perfectly round fish that looks a lot like the ancient Greek discus. Ever since, Heiko has spent his life in the manic pursuit of new species across the globe.

I did eventually manage to get to Sentarum. Unfortunately, it was the worst time of the year. The lake system drains seasonally. I got there just at the point where you couldn't take a boat into the swamp because it was too low or walk in because the water was too high.



Former Indonesian president Susilo Bambang Yudhono paid 200 million rupiah ($20,000) for this arowana, swimming here during an exhibition in Jakarta.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ADEK BERRY, AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Charles Kingsley, the British children's book author, wrote "The pleasure of finding new species is too great; it is morally dangerous." Were you "corrupted" by your obsessive search for the arowana?

Yeah, I think I was. There is something dangerous about fetishizing a fish: placing a species on a pedestal, trying to own it, and hold it up as an iconic species. My own quest, as well-meaning as it was, took over my life. The first sign of trouble was when I changed my name to get into Myanmar. I was worried I wasn't going to be able to get a visa as a journalist so I took my husband's last name after I got married. At that point, I should have realized that maybe I was getting in too deep. *[Laughs.]*

Mine is not the only life to have been corrupted by this fish, either. While I was reporting, someone in New York ended up in a high-security prison for his involvement with the fish. You think of a pet fish as this innocent thing, a reminder of childhood. But the Asian arowana is an agent of chaos throughout the world.

You traveled to 15 countries in search of the arowana, by plane, jeep, and canoe. What were the best—and worst—moments of that quest?

During this whole quest, there was never a time where I was sitting back, thinking, "Well, isn't this a fun adventure!" It was all pretty painful. One of my lowest points came in Myanmar (formerly Burma) when I found myself sneaking into a closed-off war zone in pursuit of the fish. That was pretty nerve-racking. In terms of the awe it inspires, nothing could beat the Amazon rain forest. This was my first time in South America, and I found myself days from civilization in the jungle. The Amazon Basin is the same size as the continental U.S. You can say that and have a sense that it's a really big river but when you're actually there, trying to get to one of its tributaries, it's mind-boggling.

This interview was edited for length and clarity.

Simon Worrall curates Book Talk. Follow him on Twitter or at simonworrallauthor.com.

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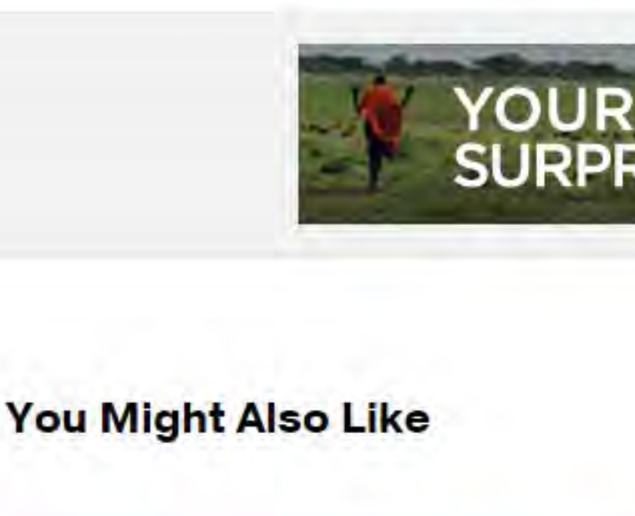

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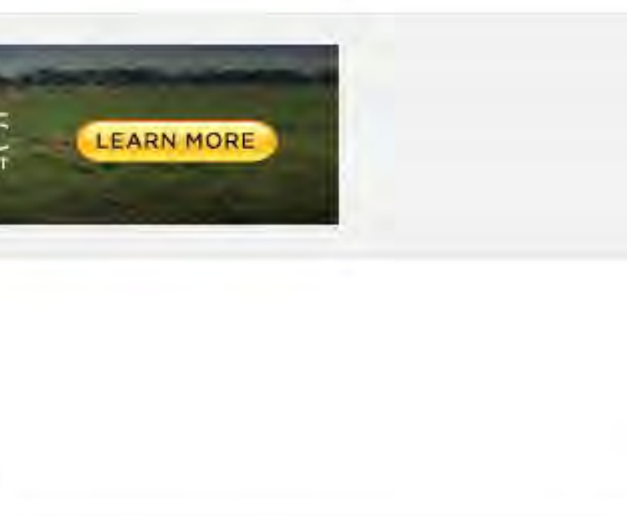

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