

A Rare Fish From Southeast Asia Is the Focus of a Smuggling Inquiry

By BENJAMIN WEISER

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Goldfish they aren't. Up to 36 inches long and with silvery bodies and colorful fins, the endangered dragon fish from Southeast Asia are prized for their exotic elegance — not to mention their good luck, according to the Chinese.

So it was a bit more than curious when about 80 of them were found hidden in a warehouse atop a garment factory in Brooklyn and in shipping crates in Port Elizabeth, N.J.

But Federal investigators say this was no conservation effort. Rather, they announced yesterday, an employee of a Chinatown aquarium shop was selling the rare fish on the black market to collectors for up to \$6,000 each.

On Wednesday, the authorities arrested the man, Zhi Lin Chen, saying they had uncovered a smuggling operation in which dozens of the fish were being imported in cartons labeled as containing goldfish and red-tail gouramies. The undercover investigation shed light on the little-known and lucrative trade in the dragon fish, otherwise known as the Asian arowana.

"It is probably the most expensive aquarium fish sold on the black market in the United States," said Dr. Dennis A. Thoney, general curator at the Aquarium for Wildlife Conservation in Brooklyn, who was asked by the investigating agency, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, to identify the dragon fish.

Now, Dr. Thoney said, about 30 of the confiscated fish are in large storage tanks in the aquarium, on Coney Island,

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The rare Asian arowana.

Photo Researchers

until they can find new homes in other public aquariums once the Government closes its case.

Mr. Chen, 36, of Brooklyn was charged with one count of trafficking in an endangered species. He was released on \$100,000 bond in Federal District Court in Manhattan, and if convicted, he could receive up to five years in prison and a fine of \$250,000, prosecutors said.

Mr. Chen could not be reached for comment yesterday.

It was unclear from court records whether he owned the Chinatown shop, 38 Aquarium, at 371 Broome Street. At the brightly lighted shop, where large goldfish swam in a tank in the window, an employee said he was not available.

His lawyer, Philip L. Weinstein, refused to comment, except to acknowledge that the charge was unusual. "It's obviously not a case that comes along very frequently," he said.

This fish tale began last fall, when Fish and Wildlife Service agents began investigating the trafficking in Asian arowana, said an affidavit filed in court.

The valuable fish is nearly extinct in the wild, although it is bred widely in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and other parts of Southeast Asia, said Dr. Carl J. Ferraris, an ichthyologist at the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco whose specialty includes fish from Southeast Asia.

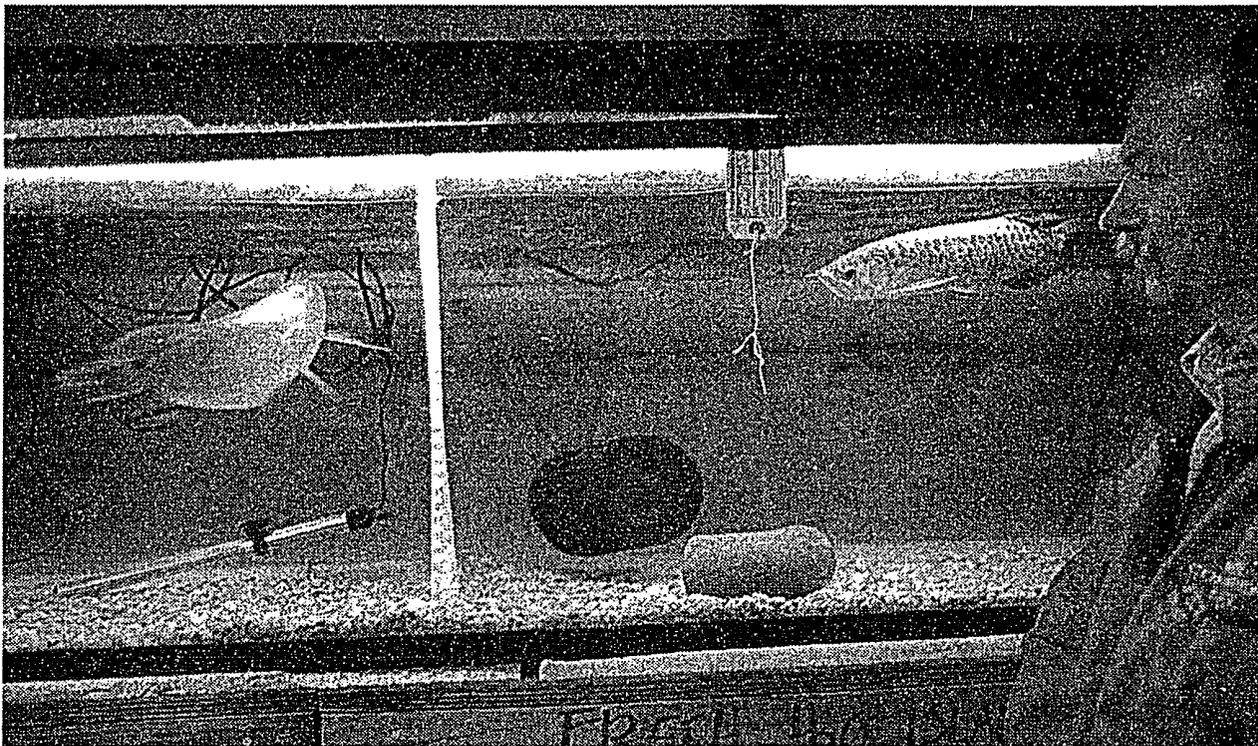
Dr. Ferraris said the arowana are bred for their color strains, and those with gold and red fins and scales bring the highest prices.

"They look very, very elegant," Dr. Ferraris said, "and they swim slowly and make a very stately presence."

During the Government investigation, agents found 59 arowana hidden inside 3 of 15 cartons that were shipped to Port Elizabeth on Oct. 8, the affidavit said.

The shipment was supposed to contain 472 goldfish and

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Edward Keating/The New York Times

Dennis A. Thoney, general curator at the Aquarium for Wildlife Conservation in Brooklyn, and the rare dragon fish. A Chinatown aquarium shop worker was charged with smuggling and selling them.

Man Accused of Trafficking in Endangered Fish

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72 red-tail gouramies from a fish farm in Malaysia and was addressed to 38 Aquarium.

Each of the arowanas was individually packed inside two plastic bags, while most of the goldfish and gouramies were dead or in poor condition, the affidavit said. It said another shipment, containing nine more of the rare fish, arrived the next day.

When undercover agents visited 38

Aquarium in November, they met with a man they now say was Mr. Chen. They asked him whether they could purchase Asian arowana and were given a price of \$1,000 to \$6,000 each, the affidavit said.

On April 2, they returned to the shop and were taken by Mr. Chen to a garment factory on 63d Street in Brooklyn.

There, they found numerous fish tanks and pools, containing about a dozen arowana, on the second floor, the affidavit said.

The document said the agents paid a total of \$2,500 for two fish, one ruby red and one red-tailed gold.

The fish were later examined by Dr. Thoney, who confirmed that they were endangered.

Yesterday, at the factory where the fish were found, dozens of workers could be seen at sewing machines.

Asked whether there were any fish tanks in the building, a manager said: "This is a factory. There are no fish tanks."