

## EXCLUSIVE

## Ornamental fish farming, entrepreneurship with small investment

By Sadeq Dehqan\*

It has always been a delight, to say the least, to watch the dancing of the vibrant and exquisite fish in an aquarium, and it is arguably peaceful. Considering the constant tension that living an urban life causes, we would say that this peace is now doubly important. So, it is no surprise that some people choose to bring the peaceful beauty of nature and specifically, the sea, to their home and workplace by keeping ornamental fish. These ornamental varieties of fish are easier to keep as pets compared to other species, and this has steadily raised the demand to buy them. However, it's not always about what the heart wants. Some people have developed their entire profession around ornamental fish. So their lives become much more entangled with these beautiful creatures. We went to the southern part of Navvab Expressway to the main aquarium fish market in Tehran to prepare a report on this matter. According to the salesmen, there are about 80 stores on both sides of the expressway.

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Amin Mossayyebi, a 30-year-old man, has been selling ornamental fish for 10 years. He worked in a store as an apprentice for six years, but it has been four years since he has been running his own store. He has been interested in keeping and farming aquarium fish since childhood and has started his business with an investment worth almost 550 US dollars (15 million tomans).

"It was not terribly expensive at that time, but now a lot more money is needed to start this kind of business. However, it still wouldn't be considered much."

Asked about his income, he said, "Naturally, it is not a necessity for people to buy ornamental fish, yet it is considered a low-priority hobby. In light of the current economic situation, many people choose not to purchase this type of fish altogether. As a consequence, we have witnessed a drop in our income. It is worth noting that aquarium fish have a high casualty rate, so as purveyors of live fish, we have to make a profit from the half of our lot that may statistically survive. But now, people can afford less, and sometimes our income doesn't cover the casualties."

"However, keeping an aquarium is interesting enough that some people have not forgotten about them even in these difficult times; they keep our business afloat," Mossayyebi claimed. "We even have many customers who have been advised to procure and maintain an aquarium just to help them calm their nerves."

It's safe to say that many of us already wonder what types of fish people buy the most. So I asked him the same question, to which he responded, "Guppy is one of the most popular. The main reason for its popularity is the fact that it's live-bearing. Poecilia, Angelfish and swordtail are also among the popular ones. These fish were among the first to be mass-farmed and intro-

Mohammad Mohammadi, a 26-year-old man, has also been selling aquarium fish for about six years. His love for animals is the reason why he chose this job.

"Aquarium fish are particularly peaceful. The underwater world is unique and beautiful, and I enjoy it a lot," Mohammadi said. "However, this job has its own difficulties. I started my business six years ago, with a total investment of 730 US dollars. But now, the economic situation is not as good. It's just our personal love for our job that has kept us working. To be fair, this job also gives us a peace of mind that can rarely be found in other jobs."

I asked whether he wanted to expand his business and enter the field of fish farming.

"I would like that very much, but I lack the necessary funds. However, I have never thought about bowing out of my job and pursuing other careers, because it's com-



duced to the market. That's why they are better known and keeping them is nostalgic for some people. However, Neon tetra, Red Platy and Catfish are becoming popular in recent years."

Mossayyebi estimated that over 95 percent of the ornamental fish kept in his shop are domestically farmed because most customers cannot afford the imported ones.

"The price range of the majority of our fish here starts from just below one US dollar for a single fish and goes up to almost two US dollars, and none of them are imported from abroad. The importation has recently been ground to a halt and, as a result, a number of fish are no longer in the market. For example, you can hardly find Red Arowana, but Silver Arowana is still present in the market because they are domestically farmed."

Regarding the process of fish farming, he maintained, "You can earn more income by fish farming, but it is time-consuming. You can start with a small investment. It is possible to farm aquarium fish here in Tehran, too, however, it is more economical to do so in smaller cities, since water, electricity and gas cost much less."



patible with my temperament, and I find peace of mind in it. It's not only about the money."



Soon afterward, we approached Amir Tahmasebi, a sales manager at a big company that specializes in importing fish as well as materials needed to maintain an aquarium. Tahmasebi started farming fish in 2001, when he was just 18 years old, with just 18 US dollars. However, he eventually got out of the business of farming fish; instead, his activities have been limited to importing ornamental fish for a few years now.

He explained that a number of years ago, the water level of Lake Urmia in northwestern Iran dropped significantly. Consequently, Brine Shrimp that resid-

ed in the lake became nearly extinct. This made it difficult to provide enough food to farm ornamental fish. Suddenly, it was not economic for him to continue his business anymore and he switched to importation.

On the importance of Brine Shrimp in farm fishing, he elaborated, "If you feed the newly-born fish with Brine Shrimp, they will grow much faster and more will survive. The Brine Shrimp population in Lake Urmia has been significantly reduced, and not enough Brine Shrimps are being imported. So, the fish farmers have slowly turned to using other types of food, namely Greenwater, Daphnia and Rotifer."

Regarding importation, he said, "We mostly import fish of saline water because they are not being farmed in the country."

Tahmasebi claimed, "Currently, less than 30 percent of aquarium fish can live in saline water. There is a higher demand for freshwater fish, whether it be for farming or keeping them in an aquarium. The price of farming saline water fish is notably higher. All in all, aquarium fish farming requires a smaller investment compared with many other types of business."

## Ornamental fish farming, a business ranging from small to profitable

Ornamental fish farming is among the small businesses which can potentially become profitable if developed.

The job market has become so competitive and saturated these days that it's almost impossible to find a profitable job that requires a small investment to launch. So much so that some would say it's no less than a dream. Ornamental fish farming, however, has not been saturated yet and, regardless of these circumstances, can be a dream come true for those that seek a job marked by such characteristics, especially in developing countries.

Secretary of the Committee for Ornamental Aquatics in Iran's Aquatics Production and Trade Union told Iran Daily in an exclusive interview that the aquarium and ornamental fish industry is relatively small, but the financial turnover has been high, even in developing countries.

Alireza Khiabani added that this industry, in the first place, has played a role in reducing poverty and unemployment across the world, and, in the second place, has generated wealth as an emergent multi-faceted profession.



Alireza Khiabani, secretary of the Committee for Ornamental Aquatics in the Aquatics Production and Trade Union of Iran

and their economic values are completely different from each other. However, it can be said that there is a great difference between farming a certain species of fish and selling the same species. Everywhere you go, the average profit for distributing aquarium fish is between 100 and 125 percent, while retailers reap up to 200 percent profit. About 15 percent of the income generated in the industry pertains to selling ornamental fish, whereas the remaining 85 percent goes to selling fish as food, aquariums, plants, devices for producing light and heat, filters, medication, etc.

**How is ornamental fish farming doing as a small business in Iran? Does it pay well?**



**What would you say are the benefits of farming ornamental fish?**

The aquarium and ornamental fish industry is a multi-billion dollar industry in more than 125 countries. More than 2,500 species of ornamental fish are being traded in this industry, over 60 percent of which are freshwater fish. Today, two particular approaches in this industry have changed: For one thing, exporting ornamental fish now originates in modern markets, rather than the traditional markets. For another, ornamental fish are now farmed in captivity rather than caught in nature. These two changes can be considered parts of a broad and strategic procedure that have been developed, to the delight of the friends of the environment. What is more, they in turn led to the economic growth and formation of various companies that aim to secure the supply chain of ornamental fish.

In addition, ornamental fish farming does not require a huge investment and can be done on various scales, ranging from small (home-based) to large (mass-production). Given the fact that these varieties of fish grow relatively fast on the farm, they can be released to the market sooner than aquatic fish. Plus, ornamental fish can be farmed all year. These benefits have turned this business into a part-time or potentially full-time profession that is also pursued by some female heads of household, in particular.

**How is value added in this business?**

It's hard to say, because there are many species of fish in this industry

According to statistics presented by Iran Fisheries Organization (IFO) in October 2019, there were 1,600 active units of ornamental fish farming in the country, 30 percent of which were small units. The other 20 percent (around 300 units) are the largest farmers that can produce over 1 million to 5 million ornamental fish annually. Each exported fish unit is, on average, worth three to five times more than the price for which they are being sold inside the country. If fish farmers would avoid focusing solely on the domestic market, they may have a better chance to seize the markets abroad and bring in more profit.

**How do you assess the capacities of ornamental fish farming in Iran?**

The history of the aquarium and ornamental fish trade in Iran goes back to early 1961. Yet the business relatively expanded in 1981. However, in the past three decades, the industry has been placed under the spotlight and many advances have been made in it. In light of the outstanding potential that this industry enjoys in Iran (including the appropriate climate, technical knowledge and the loving expert workforce that it has), it is expected that Iran will become the hub of ornamental fish farming and its related industries in the Middle East in the near future, if only it would be well-supported. That is why we have formed the Committee for Ornamental Aquatics to usher this industry to prosperity and a higher employment rate, following the footsteps of successful countries.