

## **Arkansas Game and Fish Commission's Mobile Aquarium Project**

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*Abstract:* In January 1992, the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission purchased an 11-m trailer mounted aquarium for use in its Aquatic Resources Education Program. Although quite costly and very labor intensive, this project has proven to be one of the finest public relations tools anyone could have imagined. Over .5 million people per year have viewed the 13,250-l display in its first 2 years of operation. The display is erected at fairs, schools, boat shows, town festivals, fishing seminars, clinics, etc. It is often stocked with 25 or 30 different species of fish, all indigenous to Arkansas waters. The Aquarium provides an excellent tool for teaching various fishing techniques, lure demonstrations, and fish behavior.

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In early 1992, the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission received the unique opportunity to purchase a 13,250-l, trailer mounted aquarium for our Aquatic Resources Education Program. The Mobile Aquarium is an educational showpiece designed to instruct Arkansas' public in fish identification, ecology, fishing techniques, and ethics. Mr. Larry Richter of Bismark, Arkansas, builder of the original "Hawg Trough" mobile fish tanks, offered to sell the Commission a tank identical to his proven design. Mr. Richter is genuinely interested in promoting angler education to youngsters and offered to donate 25% of the cost of the tank to the Commission to match federal Sportfish Restoration funds. The cost of the tank was \$25,000. No state funds were used to purchase or to operate the exhibit.

The tank is physically quite impressive. The trailer itself is 36 feet in length, 2.4 m wide and 2.4 m tall. Dimensions of the actual tank are 8 × 1.2 × 1.2 m. The tank is made of 2.5 cm Lexan bullet-proof glass. Mounted atop the tank is the bow of a Ranger Bass boat complete with a dummy 150 horsepower Johnson outboard motor. It has a built-in filter and aeration system. A speaker can stand on the boat bow and demonstrate lures and techniques while addressing the crowd on the built-in public address system.

The display has proven to be quite a crowd pleaser. Its popularity has been greater than anyone could have ever imagined. During peak periods in the spring and summer months, we often receive 5 to 10 requests per week to erect the display at some event. Of course, we cannot accommodate them all and normally the tank is erected 4 or 5 times per month. This has proven to be a very labor intensive project. It takes at least a half day to erect and a half day to disassemble the exhibit, plus requires a crew at the fish hatchery to seine and transport the fish to the site. The tank is moved to the erection site, leveled, and filled with tap water which is then treated to remove chlorine. It takes about 4 hours to fill with a garden hose, and about 15 minutes with a fire hose if a hydrant is nearby.

Although the display attracts viewers of all ages and genders, the program has been aimed at children. Children will stand and stare in fascination for literally hours at a time. We could not have come up with a better educational tool. We often stock the aquarium with 25 or 30 different species of fish, all indigenous to Arkansas. By far, you will field many more questions about the rough fish such as the gars, sturgeons, paddlefish, and carps than you get about the gamefish. Most people simply never get the chance to see many of the fish that we often display.

The aquarium is erected at fairs, schools, boat shows, town festivals, conservation and environmental events, fishing seminars, clinics, etc. We try to show at events which draw large crowds and we set the display up for 2 or 3 days at a time due to the labor that the tank demands.

Donations from private industry have made this program possible. Wal-Mart, the lure manufacturer PRADCO, and ENSCO, an environmental waste disposal company, each pledged \$5,000 per year to this program. When combined with federal matching funds, this gives us a \$60,000 per year budget for this program. A Dodge truck dealer also made a 25% donation toward the purchase of a Dodge Truck with which to pull the trailer. Without the help of these sponsors and companies, this program could not have been the success that it has proved to have been.

An estimated .5 million people per year have seen this exhibit in its first 2 years of operation. Its popularity has been staggering. It is definitely the hit of the show at the State Fair, at boat shows, and at other events. Crowds are often 10 or 15 deep around both sides of the tank waiting to get a view of the fish. Hundreds of people will gather around to hear professional bass fishermen give a seminar from atop the tank. Youngsters, the focus of the exhibit, are the future of the sport that we all love, and instilling an interest in children at a young age is of utmost importance to us. After all, these children are the fishing license buyers of tomorrow.