

# Freddy's Odyssey

*by Ron DeWilde, August 1998*

I recognized the malady immediately. During my previous thirty years experience of keeping freshwater fish I had seen the effects of the dreaded Head & Lateral Line Erosion. Not a pretty sight. And I was shocked to discover it a condition which occurred with marine fishes as well.

In the beginning, as a novice marine aquarist, I sought to apply my breadth of freshwater knowledge to reach success with the more intricate side of the hobby. With a little reading and past experience as a guide I determined it would be easier to begin with a large tank for a "fish only" endeavor. One hundred gallons would do fine. As for filtration: a standard under gravel filter with power heads to handle biological activity in a bed of crushed coral of about 3 inches in height. Add a canister filter for particulates and I was set, or so I thought.

After the standard bio-cycle using damsels, I introduced a few hardy yellow tangs and a clownfish. And after a few months of keeping these alive I decided to step up to more exotic display fish. I swapped the tangs for several juvenile angels. Each about 1" in length. In all there were four: a Koran Angel, a Bluefaced Angel, a Queen Angel, and my favorite, the majestic Emperor Angel, or Emperor, as it is sometimes called. In the next year I reveled in my success at producing rapid growth and healthy specimens and so consequently, found myself ill-prepared for the next chain of events.

I eagerly awaited the coming of age of my group of angels. I had heard about the amazing transition of color transformation when these fishes begin to reach adulthood. The angels had grown to a length of about four or five inches. The time was soon and one day I awoke to find not the beauty, but the beast. There it was. The beginnings of that ugly condition, Head & Lateral Line Erosion. Right there, on my prized Emperor. A process where the fish literally exhibits a wasting away of the outer layers of skin along the lateral line and around the head area. It was an aesthetic nightmare. And I knew, in it's extreme form, a condition which could result in death. I was devastated. What could I do? I had heard of no real lasting treatment for such a disease. A program of nutritional supplements and frequent water changes might help. But no one could boast of truly reversing the affliction with assurance it would not return. And so I was left with the question, what should I do?

I decided to keep the fish at least so that I might witness it's transition from juvenile to adult. Additionally, my moral convictions as a harbinger of caged pets compelled me to attempt to provide all I could for the specimen. I tried food supplements and more frequent water changes, but I could not arrest the erosion. I had now kept the fish for about eighteen months and though the fish did not die, I had the sense it wished it would!

Although the Emperor continued to develop into an otherwise beautiful adult, the disease persisted to the point where the fishes head was completely enveloped with a raw, open wound appearance. A deep canal was etched along his lateral line. His now unmistakable, painfully obvious misfortune prompted my daughter to say, "he looks like Freddy Kruger!", the infamous horror movie star whose face was bloodied, raw and shredded. And so, the moniker stood, and poor "Freddy" remained in our custody, seemingly with his days numbered.

Now Freddy, I am sure, was at the zenith of his discomfort when I happened to a man

named Leng Sy. And as it turns out, Leng had just the answer for me and my ill fish. An answer, he described, as having taken seven years to develop. An answer with such astounding simplicity, I can only describe it as miraculous. It seems Leng had developed a unique filtration system whereby the water quality of a marine aquarium is actually replenished with vital chemical compounds. This system which he called "The EcoSystem Method" is the only one of its kind. The filter consists of a separate filter housing in which Caulerpa coral is harvested with 24 hour lighting. What makes the filter unique is the medium the coral is harvested in. Leng calls it "Miracle Mud", an organic substrate that took him years to develop. The "Miracle Mud", he described, rejuvenates the water quality, thereby actually simulating the natural environment. He showed me pictures documenting other successes he'd had with reversal of Head & Lateral Line Erosion. I witnessed his impressive display of EcoSystem reef tanks showing beautiful examples of hard and soft corals. And so, when he offered to place Freddy in one of his system equipped aquariums, I agreed without hesitating. In February 1998 Freddy became a case study for the effectiveness of the EcoSystem Aquarium.

Every month I returned to Freddy's "hospital" and at just the second visit noticed improvements and he did so with only the change of tank surroundings, and with no change in diet. With each succeeding monthly visit I witnessed the transformation in progress. The shrinking of his lesions was obvious. His demeanor markedly better. Leng instructed to me that with such an advanced case of erosion it would take some time to reverse what took me over two years to create! Still I was amazed at the progress of his return to health and vitality. Today, seven months later, I can say with confidence Freddy is about 85% cured. It appears he will be completely healthy within a month or two. Needless to say, I am acquiring an EcoSystem filter for my own tank. Additionally, I intend to set up an EcoSystem reef tank with the assurance I know I can create a flourishing display with the most delicate species the ocean has to offer.