

THE SEAHORSE CHRONICLES

THE Q WORD

by BERNARD HARRIGAN

During ancient times, the Greeks built an enormous effigy of a horse out of the wood from their ships, and offered it to the people of Troy to pay them homage. The mighty Greeks had been warring with them, but without success. Troy was a city with an impenetrable wall built around it, thwarting every Greek assault.

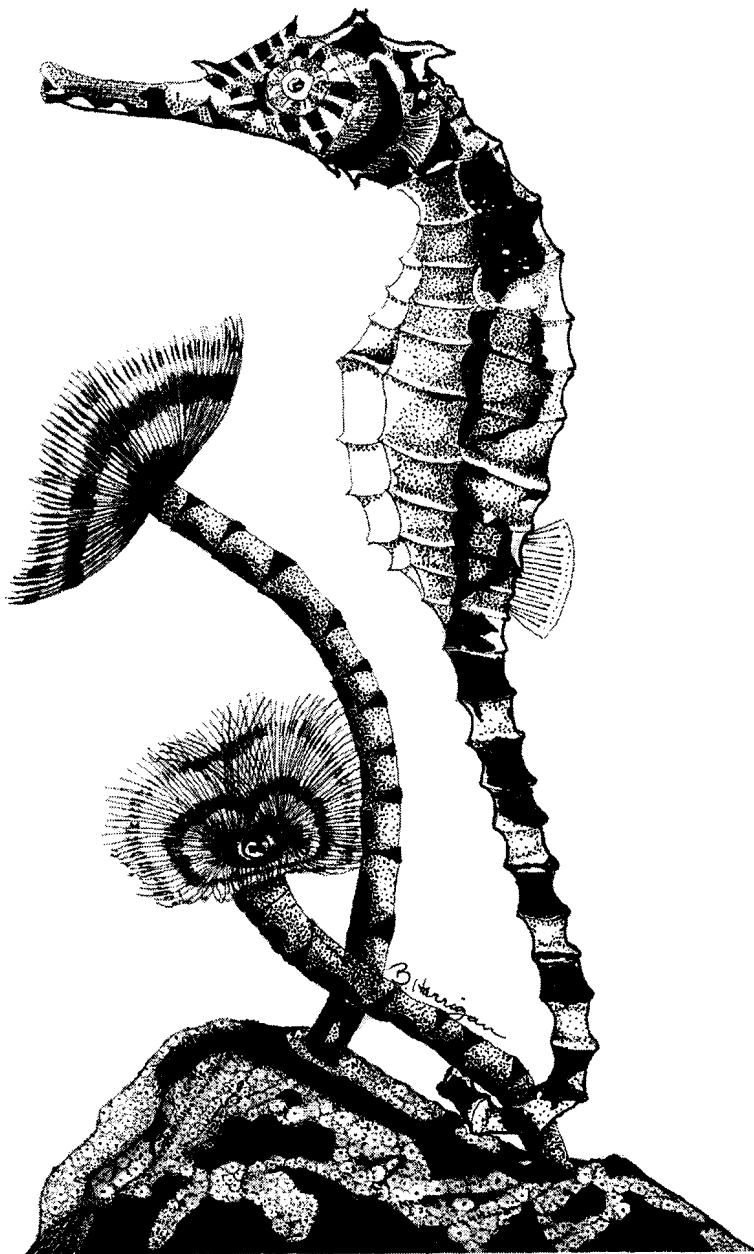
Not seeing the Greek soldiers or their ships any longer, the people of Troy thought that the Greeks had given up and gone back home, leaving the horse as a gift to them because they had been such worthy opponents. Elated that the war was over, they brought the horse inside the city and celebrated. After the celebration was over, and everyone was asleep, Greek soldiers climbed out of the horse, attacked the city, and took over Troy. If the people of Troy never brought in the Trojan Horse, they wouldn't have lost their city to the Greeks that day.

Why am I talking about the Trojan Horse in a column on seahorses? Because every disease that has ever been in any of your aquariums you brought in yourself. Whenever you introduce something new into your aquarium, whether it's a fish, an invertebrate, or even a plant, you risk introducing a pathogen too. They're hiding like Greek soldiers waiting to attack. The only way to prevent this is to quarantine the item first. It's standard operating procedure at all public aquariums. I think of it as an insurance policy against disaster.

Right now you are probably rolling your eyes and thinking, "I've never quarantined new fish and I've never had a problem." Congratulations! You've been lucky. How long do you think it

will be until your luck runs out? Hopefully never, but why take the chance? There are two types of fishkeepers in the hobby; those that **do** quarantine their new additions, and those that **will** quarantine their new additions. Don't think so? Let me tell you a story.

This guy set up his first reef tank. He had a nice assortment of corals, crustaceans, and other



Drawing by Bernard Harrigan

invertebrates. He even had a fish or two. He picked them out carefully, one at a time, and waited a month before adding another. There was no quarantining, and only minor problems here and there — nothing major, and nothing that could be linked to a new addition.

The latest difficulty involved algae; the bane of every reefkeeper. The tank had the usual cast of algae eating characters, but something more was necessary. Consulting his circle of reefkeeping buddies, it was decided that a good algae eating fish was needed — a Flame Angel, everyone agreed. At the time, the Flame Angel, a dwarf angelfish, was the “chic” algae eating fish to keep.

Later a friend informed him that a certain pet shop had just received a bunch of Flame Angels and had them on sale. He and two of his pals all bought Flame Angels that night. Needless to say, it was introduced without having been quarantined.

That weekend, while doing his tank maintenance, he was beaming. The algae was declining, and his new acquisition was looking like a jewel in a crown. By the second weekend, the algae was completely in check, but the angel wasn't out as much as it had been.

Later that week, he was looking at the tank before he rushed off to work. He didn't see the angel. He didn't think much of it. The angel usually hid in the morning. When he got home, there was still no sign of the angel. He became concerned. Moving things around in the tank, he found the angel, or what was left of it, wedged between rocks. It looked like the crustaceans had been eating at it. It disintegrated into a nebulous cloud as it was being removed.

He wondered how long it had been dead. He had worked late the night before, so the lights were out when he came home. Staring into the tank, nothing seemed happy. The corals were closed and everything looked sedated. He did a 25% water change.

By the next day, half of the tank was either dead or dying. Corals were peeling away from their rock, shrimp keeled over and the seastar started to lose its arms. It looked like a scene from some bizarre underwater battlefield, and he was losing the war.

Another water change and several phone calls didn't help. Both of his friends' Flame Angels died too. The consensus was that those Flame Angels were caught by using cyanide. Both of his buddies had quarantined their Flame Angels, so that's all they lost. That guy had a total wipeout. That guy quarantines all his new additions before putting them into his tank. That guy is me.

My quarantine procedure is simple. I use a ten gallon tank, a mature sponge filter, a heater, and a hitching post for seahorses or a clay flowerpot for anything else. Some people use a UV (ultraviolet light) filter as a chemical freeway of eradicating any possible disease.

I keep this tank running all the time as an emergency spare, not just as a quarantine tank. It is much easier to keep a spare tank ready at all times than to try and set up a cycled aquarium at the drop of a hat. I not only use that tank to quarantine new arrivals, but as a hospital tank for sick or harassed fish, and even as a nursery for expectant father seahorses, or to house seahorse fry. In order to keep the bacteria fed in the sponge filter, I use old water from the seahorse tank to do a water change in the unoccupied quarantine tank.

When I get a new inhabitant I slowly acclimate it to the “Q-tank.” I have the temperature on the high side for the first two weeks. For *Hippocampus kuda* or *H. erectus*, it would be 85°F. That's five degrees warmer than their normal temperature range. This precipitates the emergence of any latent disease that the fish might have. It also shortens the amount of time I need to quarantine the animal.

I use plenty of aeration at this time since higher temperatures lead to lower oxygen levels in the water. But I make sure that the seahorse is protected from excess current and the bubbles themselves, which could lodge in the male's pouch and leave him floating pouch-up in the water. Seahorses also suffer from “gas bubble disease.” All you need to do is create a barrier between the seahorse and the bubbles.

If there is no sign of disease after two weeks, drop the temperature down to correspond with the temperature in the main seahorse tank. If disease does raise its ugly head, use the appropriate treatment to treat the disease. Having found and treated the disease in the “Q-tank” has saved you from the trouble and headache of having to deal with it in the main tank.

When I quarantine invertebrates or plants, I keep it even simpler. I raise the temperature five degrees above their normal range. I look for any signs of trouble or troublemakers, and only quarantine them for one week. What could be simpler?

If you still think that all of this is just too much trouble for you to bother with, then I hope that luck stays with you. If it doesn't, well, there are two types of hobbyists — those that do quarantine their fish, and those that will!

