



The Río Magdalena, pictured below at Honda in April 2011, flows through a gigantic valley.



In Search of the Blue-Eyed Plec



by Heiko Bleher • It was April 2011, and it had been over 20 years since my last visit to the Magdalena valley. This time, my objective was to discover why the export of the Blue-Eyed Plec, *Panaque cochliodon*, from this region came to a standstill in the mid 1990s. What could have caused this sudden change?

For a long time the Blue-Eyed Plec, *Panaque cochliodon*, was sold incorrectly as *Panaque suttoni* in the aquarium hobby, and even called by this name in the scientific literature. The type locality of *P. cochliodon* is the Río Cauca in Colombia. Another species that purportedly has blue eyes is *Panaque suttunorum* from the Río Negro, Maracaibo basin in Venezuela. *P. suttunorum* has not so far turned up in the aquarium hobby, while the opposite is true of *P. cochliodon*. I first imported both sexes of this fish with the intense blue eyes as long ago as the late 1960s. These catfishes were not very popular initially, but from the mid-1970s to around the mid-1990s it was virtually impossible to get enough of them.

The high losses among imports were attributable to the difficulty of transporting the specimens, which were usually large. There were virtually no specimens smaller than 6 inches (15 cm) total length caught, let alone shipped from Bogota, Colombia, the only export location.

I traveled several times to the collecting area. Every time this involved a hellish journey down to the middle of the Magdalena drainage along one of the most winding and dangerous roads in South America.

The majority of Blue-Eyed Plecs were collected from Honda and Cambao. Drivers transported the fishes from the Magdalena valley, just a few hundred meters above sea level, to an altitude of almost 9,843 feet (3,000 m) in Bogota. I repeatedly tried to educate the collectors and drivers and asked them to be careful, but this didn't help much—most of the numerous exporters in Colombia shipped out these beautiful fishes far too tightly packed and often still chilled.

You should know that an eternal spring, so to speak, rules in Bogota, and it is much too cold for all tropical fishes. The water temperature in the holding tanks of many exporters weren't adequately monitored, and the fishes, usually packed in simple cardboard boxes or just lying in the vehicle in plastic bags, were subjected to continually decreasing temperatures throughout the long journey up through the mountains. There was no question of quarantine in the randomly heated aquariums in Bogota, let alone the prophylactic treatment that might have increased the fishes' chances of survival. Normally they were packed and exported right away.

Travels in the Magdalena valley

In Bogota I was greeted enthusiastically by my good friend Pedro Zea at Eldorado Airport, which has remained unchanged during the more than 40 years I have known it. Now, it is slated to be demolished. Pedro runs



The Blue-Eyed Plec got its name from the characteristic color of its eyes.

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