



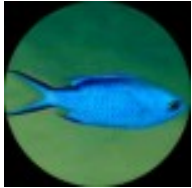
Aquarium Professionals Group

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Saltwater Fish Guarantees - What's Fair?



"But I did everything you told me to do and this fish still died. Why won't you replace it?" These words are being heard in Chicago aquarium stores more often these days as many stores are doing away with marine fish guarantees.

Why?

Customer fraud, rising wholesale saltwater livestock prices, increasing competition from mail-order, the internet and "super" pet stores, and higher maintenance costs are just a few of the reasons why many aquarium stores in Chicagoland are no longer willing to absorb the cost of replacing saltwater fish and invertebrates.

We remember the days when you could buy any fish from your local pet or aquarium shop with the confidence that if anything went wrong within a reasonable amount of time, the store would gladly replace it. You would bring in the body of the fish with a water sample from your aquarium. If the water checked out okay, the store would simply replace the fish. Those days are rapidly coming to an end however, at least in the Chicago area. If this trend is on the rise here, it would not surprise us to learn that many other stores across the country are following suit.

Many aquarium stores in our area are eliminating guarantees on marine fish and invertebrates, and some are no longer offering any guarantees on any type of livestock, fresh or saltwater. While shopping for livestock at wholesalers for our clients, we've had the opportunity to talk with several fish store owners in the area, and while all declined to allow us to use their names or their store names here, they had plenty to say about their livestock guarantee policies.

The number one reason given for doing away with marine fish guarantees by the store owners we spoke to was customer fraud and irresponsibility. As one store owner said: "The industry has changed. It used to be that most people who wanted aquaria were hobbyists who cared about the fish. Nowadays, there are plenty of people with money who only want an aquarium as a piece of living art. They'll try anything regardless of the consequences, and aren't interested in good tank management. Although we're careful to ask questions of customers about tank size, water quality, how many and what species of fish they have, etc., they can still lie to us. They know the correct answers to our questions, but they want to try something they know we won't approve of. If we have a guarantee, they can tell us anything they want, knowing we have to replace a fish if it doesn't work out. We found that once we did away with our guarantees on marine fish, our less-scrupulous customers lost less fish because they knew the financial responsibility for their fish purchases was theirs alone. We still replace fish, but only on a case-by-case basis, and only when we can be certain of the customer's honesty and sincere effort as a hobbyist."

Another store owner complained about getting water samples that were "too clean:" ". . . A customer came in to our store last week with a dead Majestic angelfish he'd bought the day before and a water sample. After some questioning, this guy lets slip that he has a two-year old 55 gallon saltwater tank with six medium fish. I'm a fairly trusting guy, but I find it impossible to believe that this tank had zero nitrates and phosphates under those conditions. More likely he mixed up some new saltwater before he came in, and tried to pass it off as his aquarium water."

While several well-known stores in the Chicago area do offer guarantees on marine fish, their policies require definitive proof that the fish was not healthy when it was sold. This may be in the form of water tests on a customer's tank before the sale and after a fish dies. Some stores have even resorted to having customers complete and sign a form listing their aquarium information and existing fish which is kept on file to check for discrepancies in case of a false claim.

Other reasons given for eliminating or putting heavy restrictions on marine fish guarantees were lower profit margins due to rising costs, and more competition from mail-order, internet and "super pet" store businesses. Profits are down in smaller aquarium stores who find themselves paying more for fish and having to compete with businesses who buy in larger volumes and have a lower overhead. As one dealer put it: "We used to be the only game in town. Ten years ago, we could afford to be liberal with our guarantees. Now many customers are buying their fish here, but ordering their dry-goods and equipment mail-order or from the internet. Fish used to be a high-profit venture. We pay far more for saltwater (fish) than we used to, but we can't mark them up the way we did in the past or no one would buy them. Money's tight and we can't afford to replace saltwater fish, especially when we know we sold a healthy one and it was killed due to customer negligence. The bottom line is that with prices of livestock the way they are, those hobbyists that aren't willing to fully support our store by buying everything here have to accept a trade-off and assume more of the risk."