

Historic Rio Negro GI status for piabas

John Dawes

Geographic Indication (GI) for ornamental fish from the Rio Negro is now a reality, rather than the pipe dream it used to be. In the words of Prof. Ning Labbish Chao, founder of Project Piaba, "This is official now! The first live animals to have received Geographic Indication and the first GI from Northern Brazil. I guess Project Piaba has made a difference. Happy retirement to me!" Yes, Labbish, happy retirement to you after so many years of commitment to the ornamental fish (piabas) and ornamental fish collectors (piabeiros) of the Rio Negro.

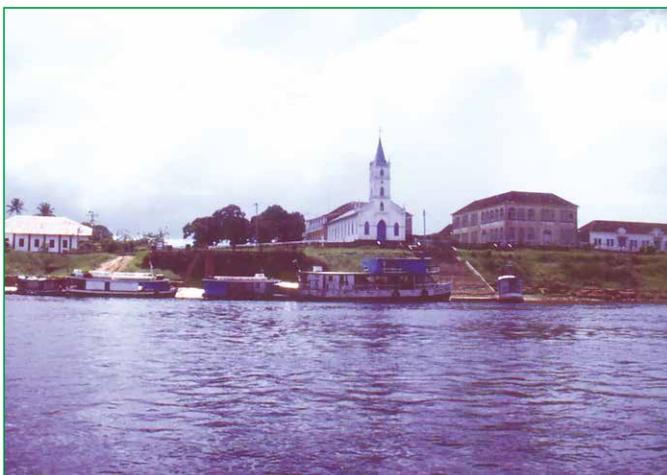
What is GI?

But what does the conferring of GI status on Rio Negro fish mean in practice? Before answering this question, it might be helpful to take a brief look at what GI actually is.

If a product carries GI status, this acts as a form of certification or guarantee that it possesses certain qualities. For example, in May, 2007, the wines from Napa Valley in California, received GI status "as a protected name in the European Union". This was the first time that an American wine-producing region became recognized as such. As a result, the wines of Napa Valley are protected against any brands that might seek to misuse the GI label for wines not produced from grapes grown in the Napa Valley. Therefore, if a bottle of wine carries the Napa Valley GI, it means that the wine in that bottle was genuinely produced from grapes grown in the Napa Valley and, consequently, carry the characteristics inherent in these grapes.

The same applies to numerous other well-known wines like Spanish Rioja, French Champagne, Jerez sherry, or to an infinity of 'more solid' products, such as cheeses like Cheddar... the list is almost endless.

GI status, thus, brings with it certain commercial advantages when it comes to quality, reputation and characteristics. In fact, this is deemed so significant within Europe that there have been several



Barcelos - the centre of the Rio Negro piaba fishery.

PHOTO: JOHN DAWES

Newly-collected cardinal tetras such as these will now carry the GI "Rio Negro" label.

PHOTO: JOHN DAWES



stringent laws in force since 1992 to protect GI products against forgery and misrepresentation.

GI applied to Amazonian fish

With regard to Amazonian fish, the principles behind GI have been around since 1999 (at least, this was when I first came across the concept at a conference in St. Louis, Missouri). Since then, the subject has been repeatedly raised at conferences, in publications and debates, but it's only been recently that signs of real progress have been detected.

On 9 September, 2014, INPI (Brazil's National Institute of Industrial Property) made the historic announcement that it had acknowledged the GI "Rio Negro" label for ornamental fish from the municipalities of Barcelos and Santa Isabel do Rio Negro... the first time ever that such status had been conferred on living organisms.

Several important factors have contributed to this momentous decision. For example, studies carried out over many years by *Project Piaba* have repeatedly shown that ornamental fish collection in the Rio Negro is not only sustainable, but also protects the rainforest. Should this fishery disappear, locals would have to resort to other methods of securing their livelihoods, all of them - like forest clearing for agriculture or ranching - having a direct and negative effect on the rainforest.

Further, ornamental fish account for around 60% of the income in the region and constitute the livelihoods of over 1,000 families. In total, the industry generates some US\$4-5 million annually for the local economy. It is also run in accordance with sustainability practices, and is regulated by IBAMA, the Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources, as well as Brazil's Department of the Environment.



Mari Balsan and Scott Dowd – all smiles after the conferring of GI status.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF MARI BALSAN

Implications

The conferring of GI status means that, from now on, Rio Negro ornamental fish – primarily, but not exclusively, the cardinal tetra – will be offered the same protection as that conferred on the aforementioned Napa Valley wines. In turn, this means that exporters of cardinals currently being bred outside Brazil would be breaking the law if they were to list them as GI fish.

The all-important certificate.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF MARI BALSAN



This isn't going to happen, though. Indeed, developments which, I believe, are already under way, could end up - quite intentionally - benefiting, at least, the Rio Negro cardinal fishery. Further, these commercially-bred fish are of good quality and do not have to rely on the GI label to survive. In fact, experience over many years now has shown these fish to be highly desirable and marketable, so there's no logical reason whatsoever for anyone to assume that the GI protocol will be breached. Quite simply, it won't happen. These commercially bred fish are perfectly capable of competing in any market place. Nonetheless, GI "Rio Negro" status means that legal protection is now in place for the *piabas* of the region.

Whether or not the confirming of GI status will convey any market advantages on the *piabas* of the Rio Negro in the months and years to come remains to be seen, but - at the very least - if you now buy a cardinal, or rummy nose, or an arowana with the GI "Rio Negro" label, you will know that it comes, not just from the Rio Negro, but from the municipalities of Barcelos and/or Santa Isabel do Rio Negro, and that it has been collected sustainably and in accordance with Brazilian law.

Long road to success

The conferring of GI "Rio Negro" status is something that has taken many years of unrelenting effort by many people, including the *Project Piaba* Economics Specialist, Mari Balsan, who was intimately involved in the preparation and submission of the petition and was, thus, instrumental in getting the Indication approved.

Also crucial was Scott Dowd, Executive Director of *Project Piaba*, who is Conservation Biologist at the New England Aquarium and Special Advisor on Ornamental Fisheries to the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, as well as the IUCN (World Conservation Union) Freshwater Fisheries Specialist Group.

In Scott's words: "The wild capture fisheries for the aquarium trade are almost always characterized as 'a problem', when, in fact, in many cases, they are 'a solution'. *Project Piaba* is extremely proud to get the aquarium fish of the Rio Negro internationally recognized Geographic Indication status. This designation is one component of a broader strategy, which includes the establishment of Best Handling Practices, improvements in intermediary and export facilities, and new marketing techniques highlighting the socioeconomic and environmental benefits of the trade. If we are going to navigate the many challenges that face the future of the hobby, we must embrace change. It is coming whether we like it or not, but we must remind ourselves that we can be the deciders of how these changes come about, and not have our growth dictated as reactions to external forces".

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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