

Saving a Red-tail Catfish from a very Quirkey Behaviour

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One morning an owner of an ornamental aquarium phoned me requesting veterinary attention for an extraordinary case. He informed me over the phone on the Saturday that one of his Red-tail Catfish had swallowed an electrical plug, which had fallen into the tank by accident.

One of our ungulates at National Zoological Gardens, Sri Lanka had calved that morning so I used this birth as an excuse to avoid the call, as I had no experience to deal with anaesthesia of fish ! Furthermore, I was under the misimpression that what he referred as a "plug" was one made out of either rags or paper which I assumed will pass in a day or two. These kinds of plugs made of rags are often used to block the outlets of fishtanks.

The following Monday a friend of mine who knows this gentleman also called and prevailed on me to help him if possible. So I went to see this fish carrying a few long artery forceps in a kidney tray without knowing what exactly would be required.

On examination of the fish, which was about 3-4 feet long, I saw that it was an electrical adapter plug and that the ends of the three pins were pressing on the muscles of the abdomen. This was very prominent on the ventral side. I also realised that there was no way for it to pass through the tract and that it had to come out from its mouth. We transferred the fish to a smaller inflatable tank.

I tried to use the artery forceps which I took with me but it was not even long enough to reach the stomach of the fish. Then, without hesitating (as he who hesitates is lost !) I decided to introduce my arm as it was the only instrument at my disposal that would reach the stomach without damaging the epithelium. Another other reason was that I had, as I mentioned before, no experience in anaesthesia of fish and could not extract the item by any other method. Using a thick glove I introduced my right arm while two aquarium personnel were restraining the fish on its ventral

side. When I reached the adapter I realised it was not one piece but that there was another adapter fixed to it . I had to separate them from each other before taking them out to avoid abrasions to the epithelium. With the thick glove I found difficult to manipulate my hand and fingers in order to separate the two plugs. At that time I wished my left hand could also go inside the stomach of the fish to help to separate the adapter plugs !

The only alternative was to insert my arm without a glove, which I did (again "without hesitation", of course!). While introducing my arm the fish began to tighten the muscles of the anterior part of the gut as it does while eating which made the difficult procedure even more difficult. It took about 15 minutes just to separate the adapters from each other. I used my left arm from the out side of the fish to keep these objects from moving away from my right arm which was inside the fish. After separating the two pieces, I turned the adapter and held the pins in my palm completely covering them to avoid abrasions of the gut mucous membrane. First to come out was the 15 amp adapter and then the 5 amp adapter.



Jayanthi holding the electrical adaptor plug after extracting it from the catfish while staff hold the catfish.



Dr. Jayanthi Alahakoon manipulating the joined electrical adaptor plugs in the stomach of the catfish.
Photos anonymous.

The owner was very happy and thanked me profusely. Only when I went to wash my hands did I realise that my arm was covered with abrasions that had occurred due to the tightening of the thick mucous membrane of the mouth by the fish. These healed in about two weeks.

Recently I went to see my patient and was very pleased to see it swimming in its big tank. The satisfaction and happiness I gained by attending to this case was absolutely indescribable !

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