

ENVIRONMENT

Catfish of Cumaca Cave

BY AMY DEACON

THE RIVERS of Trinidad are home to six very distinctive types of catfish. These include armoured catfish such as the leopard-spotted "teta" (*Hypostomus robinii*), the enigmatic "cascadu" (*Hoplosternum littorale*) and the popular aquarium fish "pui pui" (*Corydoras aeneus*). All tend to be bottom-dwellers and are grouped together as "cat" fish on account of their barbels, which are sensory "whisker-like" structures on their faces that are used to locate food. In Trinidad, the fish most commonly referred to as "catfish" is *rhamdia quelen*, which unlike the species listed above, is silvery, unarmoured and scaleless.

Rhamdia is found throughout much of Central and South America, from Mexico to Argentina. In TT, it is especially common in the rivers of the southern slopes of the Northern Range, but is found throughout the country, with the exception of Trinidad's north coast and the whole of Tobago.

Like many catfish species, *rhamdia* possesses mildly venomous spiny rays on its pectoral and dorsal fins, which are used for defence against larger predatory fish. The barbels on either side of the face help it to locate food such



RHAMDIA QUELEN CATFISH

as the preferred prey of small fish in dark or murky waters. However, the varied omnivorous diet also includes insects, zooplankton, plant matter and crustaceans.

Rhamdia especially favours the shadowy waters underneath bridges and tend to hide under rocks or dead wood during the day, emerging into the open at night to feed. Incredibly, one population has taken its preference for shadowy habitats to the absolute extreme – the dark depths of the Cumaca Caves.

Catfish was first described as

dwelling within these Northern Range caves, which are more famous for their oilbirds, in 1926. For many years people believed these cave fish to be a completely different species named *Caecorhamdia urichi*, as it was virtually blind, had lost much of its pigmentation and had considerably shorter barbels. However, recent studies suggest that these pale, sightless catfish are simply a "trogomorphic" (cave-adapted) form of *rhamdia*, that has invaded the cave and adapted to the unusual conditions. This invasion

appears to have happened on at least two separate occasions and deserves further investigation. Indeed, the late Prof Julien Kenny began some preliminary observations which suggested that the cave catfish was remarkably flexible in its traits – for example, when exposed to sunlight, some of the pigmentation would begin to reappear.

Whether cave or river-dwelling, catfish fertilisation occurs externally. This means that the female will lay tiny eggs in the water (each less than 3mm diameter),

which the male will then fertilise with his sperm. After just 48 hours these will hatch after which they continue to grow rapidly. Young fish often have a distinctive dark stripe along the body which fades in the adult fish. If you ever manage to catch a *rhamdia* (which is almost impossible using a net, thanks to its preference for hiding in small, dark spaces), chances are it would be a female, as scientists have shown that there tends to be twice as many females as males in the average population.

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Feasts for Easter

Lemon Cherry Scones

Prep: 35 Mins • Serves: 6

Ingredients:

2 1/4 cups	All purpose flour	4 oz	Cream cheese, softened
1/4 cup	Granulated sugar	1	Egg
1 tbsp	Lemon peel/zest	1/3 cup	CARNATION® Full Cream Evaporated Milk
2 tsp	Baking Powder	1 cup	Maraschino cherries, chopped
1/4 tsp	Salt	1/4 cup	Lemon juice
1/3 cup	Butter/margarine, chilled	1/4 cup	Granulated sugar

Method:

- In a medium mixing bowl, mix flour, granulated sugar, lemon zest, baking powder and salt
- Using a pastry blender, cut butter/margarine into flour mixture until mixture looks like bread crumbs
- In another bowl, mix cream cheese and egg together
- Add **CARNATION® Full Cream Evaporated Milk** and cherries to cream cheese mixture
- Stir cream cheese mixture into flour mixture. Mixture should form a ball
- Knead dough on floured surface for one minute
- Gently flatten the ball of dough onto a baking tray. Brush with lemon juice and sprinkle the top with remaining sugar
- Bake in preheated oven at 375°F (190°C) for 20 minutes or until golden brown

Nutrition Facts Per Serving

Calories: 544Kcal Protein: 8.1g Carbohydrates: 65g Fats: 26g

*Percentage Daily Values are based on the recommended daily allowances for a 2,000 kcal diet.



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ENVIRONMENT

Fascinating catfish caught for food

●CATFISH from Page 9B

In the Cumaca Caves, I have only seen small specimens, but in the rivers adult rhamdia can reach lengths of nearly half a metre. This makes it the largest catfish in Trinidad, but nothing in comparison with their Asian relative, the Mekong giant catfish which can grow to nearly three metres long. At the other end of the spectrum, the parasitic "candiru" catfish from the Amazon is just a few centimetres long and is feared for rumours that it occasionally swims up the human urethra causing excruciating pain. However, whether

such anecdotes are true remains a matter of debate.

Several species of Trinidadian catfish are caught for food – including rhamdia, tetra and cascado. Others are collected to be sold and bred in the pet trade – such as pui pui. However, a much greater threat to the diversity and distribution of our catfish species is the destruction of their riverine habitats, especially in the Northern Range. For example, the famous Cumaca Cave is situated near to one of the many quarries that are systematically destroying the ecosystem from which we still have

so much to learn. Let us make sure that these fascinating fish will be around for a long time to come – who knows what discoveries are still to be made.

For more info on our natural environment contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at www.admin@tfn.org or visit the website at www.tfn.org. The club's next monthly meeting will be held on April 9 at St Mary's College, Port-of-Spain. Dr Jo-Anne Sewlal, of the university of the West Indies will deliver a lecture titled "Webs and what they are for."



ATLANTIC Sports Ambassadors Kieron Pollard and Andrew Lewis join these excited students from Newtown Boys in "fighting fires" at the Fondes Amandes Community Reforestation Programme.

Pupils get lessons in conservation

FOR CHILDREN who grow up or spend most of their time in urban settings, the danger posed by bush fires may seem distant and unreal. Recently, to expose their pupils to environmental challenges in the hills of St Ann's, nine primary schools in north Trinidad participated in the Atlantic Environment Education Series, a special programme facilitated by the Fondes Amandes Community Reforestation Programme (FACRP) in partnership with LNG producer Atlantic.

Some 234 standard three pupils participated from Barataria Anglican, Belmont Government, Eastern Girls, Eastern Boys, Newtown Boys' RC, Maloney Government, Richmond Street Boys, St Francis Girls and Woodbrook Presbyterian, said a media release from Atlantic.

Under the programme which began September last year, the pupils were taken on two eco-field trips to the Fondes Amandes community during the school year – a visit each for the dry and rainy seasons. On each trip, the children learned about climate change effects and the impact of forest fires during and after the dry season. They were tutored in basic fire prevention techniques and also shown the best methods for planting trees for reforestation.

Trudy Solomon, sustainability officer at Atlantic said that the Education Series was an important intervention that helped the next generation develop skills in not only environmental conservation, but also gardening and agriculture.

"Environmental conservation is an important part of Atlantic's focus on helping to build sustainability in our home community," Solomon said in the release. "In previous years, we would have focused on spreading this message to primary schoolchildren in Point Fortin and surrounding communities. However, we believe that there is need to bring this important area of knowledge to children all over the country, especially in those communities where awareness about the environment may be scarce."

With its long history in agro-forestry and in facilitating eco-tours, the Fondes Amandes Community Reforestation Programme (FACRP) was an ideal partner for Atlantic's environmental thrust, Solomon noted.

Akilah Jaramogi, founder and director of Fondes Amandes Community Reforestation Programme, said her team was delighted to work with Atlantic on a programme for children which focused on environmental education.

The field trips also taught the children about TT's indigenous flora and fauna and how to make herb kits. Pupils has the opportunity to plant their own herbs such as thyme, fever grass and chadon beni.

For the last 2014/15 eco trip the pupils from Newtown Boys' RC were accompanied by Atlantic Sports Ambassadors Kieron Pollard and Andrew Lewis. The two premier athletes were as fascinated as the pupils were by the winding forest trails and lush foliage. The ambassadors encouraged the pupils to practise and share what they learnt on the eco-trip.

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