

“L” Number Catfish

Family Loricariidae. There are 80 genera and more than 560 species.

Common names include L-number Catfish, Sucker Catfish, Plecostomus. Among the most popular in Australia are Plecostomus, Whiptail Catfish and Bristlenose Catfish

Natural Range

South America, and in particular the Amazon basin and its tributaries. There are 2 basic habitats in which they occur:

- Rock or sand bed rivers with cool (20 – 24°C), fast flowing, and oxygen rich water.
- Muddy lowland waters that are generally warmer (24 – 27°C) and tolerate lower oxygen levels and still water.

Maximum Size and Longevity

Due to the large number of species, maximum sizes varies considerably from around 4cm for some *Otocinclus* species up to 46 cm for Plecostomus. Lifespan also varies up to 15 years for larger species.

Water Quality

As they are from the Amazon basin, they prefer soft slightly acidic to neutral water. Depending on their biotope (see above) they may be more demanding and require fast water flow and low nutrients.

Temperature: 23°C - 28°C

pH: 6.5 – 7.5

General Hardness: 100 – 250 ppm

Feeding

Loricariidae catfish are herbivorous and prefer algae or plant based foods. They have a sucker mouth which they use to rasp algae and food particles off a surface – they are well known for their ability to remove algae from the sides of aquaria.

Try to supplement their diet with algae wafers or green vegetables such as shelled peas or broad beans, zucchini and cabbage/lettuce. Some hobbyists also have great success in feeding sheets of NORI (used to make Sushi) available from the supermarket. As they get older they may eat algae less often and you will need to supplement their diet with algae wafers that sink to the bottom of your tank.

Shrimp or fish pellets that drop to the bottom of the tank are another favourite. Drop in the algae wafers or shrimp pellets after you turn off the lights for the day to prevent the other fish in the tank from getting the food before your Plecostomus can get to it.

Compatibility

Loricariidae are generally peaceful, but can be aggressive toward others of the same species. When small they are an excellent addition to the community tank, but when fully grown the larger species may be too aggressive for small Tetras etc. They are an excellent tank mate for larger community tanks and can generally handle themselves against most large aggressive species kept in the trade – although the provision of hiding places in caves is advised.

Colour and Varieties

The body is covered by bone plates rather than scales which form an armoured skeleton which protects the fish from predators. There are also considerable colour variations within the group. While most species tend to have a darkest colour base, with lighter spots or patches of colour to aid camouflage, some species have striking contrasting colours with black and white banding as in the Zebra Plecostomus.

Sexing

Sexual dimorphism varies between species and often is more apparent during the spawning season. Some of these differences include: long spines around the head or on patches of the body, tentacle-like appendages around the mouth or head (the ‘bristles’ of a male Bristlenose Catfish). Most sexually mature specimens may also be sexed based on their bodyshape. When looking from above, the body of the male fishes tapers evenly from the head to the tail, whereas the body of the female can be quite rounded in the stomach area due to the presence of eggs.

While some Loricariidae species such as Whiptails and Bristlenose Catfish (pic below) are relatively easy to breed, many are quite difficult to breed and have not been bred in captivity. When trying to breed these species, pay close attention to the natural environment they come from as this will often indicate what conditions are needed for successful breeding, eg caves, water flow, water quality conditions.

