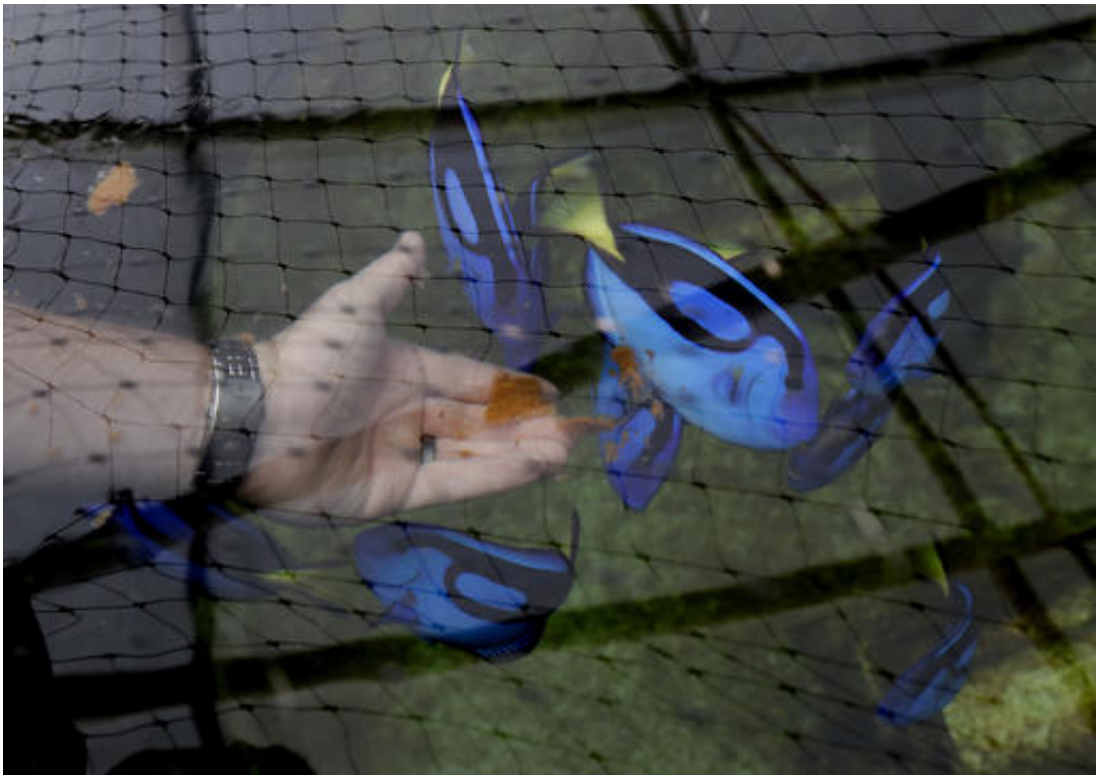
Love Disney's 'Dory' fish? Soon, you could get your own

September 2 2016, by Tamara Lush



Kevin Barden feeds Pacific Blue Tang in the University of Florida Tropical Aquaculture Lab in Ruskin, Fla. (AP Photo/Chris O'Meara)

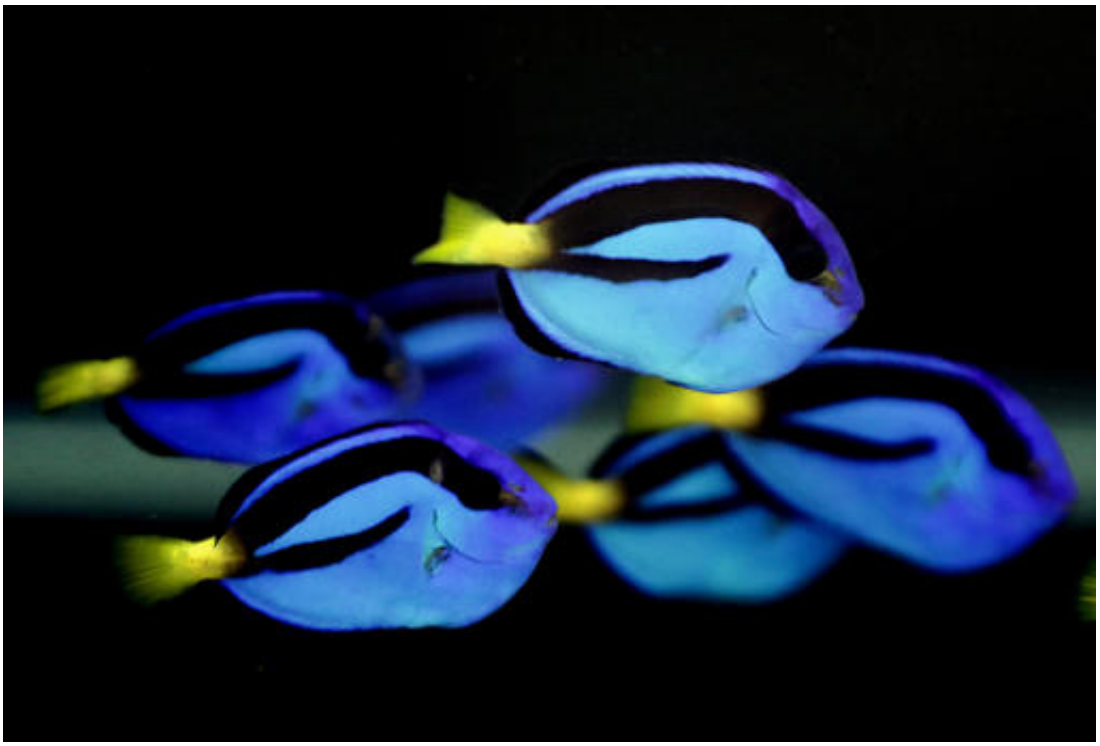
Someday soon, you might be able to find Disney's beloved "Dory" in your own aquarium—and the beautiful blue tang fish will be bred in Florida, not the Pacific Ocean.

After six years of study, a team of researchers at the University of Florida, along with the Rising Tide Conservation, have figured out how to breed the saltwater fish in tanks for the first time. This could be a potential boon to Florida's $27 million aquaculture industry, which breeds and raises fish for home aquariums.

The star of the popular animated Disney movie "Finding Dory" has become a popular wish for aquarium hobbyists. The movie features a friendly-but-forgetful blue tang fish voiced by TV personality Ellen DeGeneres.

The movie has grossed $900 million at the box office, and because of the cartoon fish's captivating adorableness, scientists and animal rights activists fear the blue tang may suffer the same fate as Nemo, the studio's popular animated clownfish—namely that there will be an increased demand for the electric blue fish for personal aquariums, putting a strain on the species in the wild.

In a small, stuffy greenhouse about a half-hour south of downtown Tampa, researchers are developing breeding blueprints for the notoriously delicate fish.



Pacific Blue Tang are shown in a tank at the University of Florida's Tropical Aquaculture Lab in Ruskin, Fla. (AP Photo/Chris O'Meara)

"The University of Florida took on this project to try to see if we could develop commercial production protocols, essentially a recipe of how do we produce the blue tangs so that we could then take and transfer to industry, transfer that to fish farmers," said Matt DiMaggio, an assistant professor at the University of Florida's Tropical Aquaculture Laboratory in Ruskin.

People who want blue tangs currently must rely on wild, captured fish from the Pacific ocean. That often-unregulated harvesting not only depletes the species but is damaging to coral reefs.

The fish are expensive too: They cost anywhere from $30 for a tiny one to $150 for an adult. They're not ideal for small tanks; the fish grow a

foot in length.

But DiMaggio and his team have been working on the difficult process of raising the young.

Kevin Barden counts microscopic algae that will feed the Pacific Blue Tang fish at the University of Florida Tropical Aquaculture Lab in Ruskin, Fla. (AP Photo/Chris O'Meara)

"There's nutritional requirements, what do we feed these tiny fish, there's environmental requirements to think of, things like lighting, water flow in those tanks. So there's really a lot of hurdles and a lot of obstacles to overcome in those early life stages."

DiMaggio explained that blue tangs will only eat copepods, which float

in the ocean. But the copepods will only eat live algae, so the researchers had to grow the algae first.

During their last trial, DiMaggio's team was able to raise 27 fish out of 50,000 eggs.

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, which criticized the surge to acquire Nemo-namesake clownfish, dislike the idea of capturing the fish in the wild or breeding in captivity.

University of Florida associate professor Matt DiMaggio looks at growing algae at the Tropical Aquaculture Lab in Ruskin, Fla. (AP Photo/Chris O'Meara)

"Fish captured or bred for the home aquarium industry spend short lives

in a usually minuscule space, swimming in their own diluted waste without currents or stimulation, eating unvaried food, and being exposed to pathogens that their immune systems are not equipped to fight," wrote PETA's spokeswoman, Catie Cryar. "The University of Florida is supposed to be an educational institution, not an anti-educational one bent on helping greedy businesses cater to a market that disrespects animals' very natural coral reef homes for the sake of all of us."