Plecostomus
Care Sheet

The Armored Suckermouths
Plecostomus, or “plecos” as they are often called, belong to the Family Loricariidae, which is the largest family of catfish in the world. They are characterized by heavy armored plates on their bodies and sucker-shaped mouths. Scientists use a system of “L” or “LDA” numbers to identify plecostomus species, and at present there are over 500 numbers with more being added each year. Some species, like the L046 Zebra and L177 Gold Nugget pleco’s, are brilliantly colored and command high prices in stores. Many plecostomus can breathe air due to modifications in their digestive tracts. For care and maintenance purposes, Farlowella and Otocinclus catfish can be included in this group.

Natural Habitat
Most Plecostomus species are native to South America, although a few can be found in Panama and Costa Rica. They occupy a wide range of habitats, although a number of species have very limited ranges and are only found in certain parts of specific rivers. Many pleco’s live in fast-moving shallow streams and rivers, while others inhabit acidic black water, and still others favor quiet brackish estuaries. In high flow areas they use their suckermouths to attach themselves to rocks and submerged trees to keep from being swept downstream.

Water Requirements
Loricariid catfish are typically found in soft water with a low pH in the wild, however, many species sold today are commercially raised and tolerate a much wider range of water chemistry. A pH between 7.0 and 8.0, alkalinity between 3° and 10° dKH (54ppm to 180ppm), and temperature between 74° and 80° F will suffice for most captive bred species. If the aquarium is kept in a room below 74°, use an Aqueon® aquarium heater to increase the heat. Wild caught fish may require a temperature in the mid to upper 80’s, pH of 5.5 to 7.0 and alkalinity below 3° dKH (54ppm), so it’s best to research the dietary needs of any species you buy. Aqueon® Bottom Feeder Tablets, Shrimp Pellets, Tropical Granules and Algae Rounds can all be excellent foods for these catfish. Because of their nocturnal habits, many experienced hobbyists target feed their pleco’s once or twice a week with tablet or disc foods given at night. For best results feed a variety of high quality foods, and rotate your fishes’ diet daily.

Behavior/Compatibility
Many suckermouth catfish are nocturnal and spend a good portion of the day hiding in a crevice or under an overhang. However, some will adapt to aquarium life and be more sociable during the day, especially at feeding time. Loricariids are compatible with most aquarium fish, although aquarium mates should be roughly the same size as they are. Large predatory fish may try to eat smaller pleco’s or Otocinclus, resulting in the catfish becoming lodged in the bigger fish’s throat. On the other hand, large pleco’s can be safely mixed with smaller fish as they will usually not try to eat them.

Feeding
While plecostomus and other suckermouth catfish are typically sold as algae eaters, some species are carnivorous, feeding on carion in the wild. Others feed almost exclusively on wood, so it is best to research the dietary needs of any species you buy. Aqueon® Bottom Feeder Tablets, Shrimp Pellets, Tropical Granules and Algae Rounds can all be excellent foods for these catfish. Because of their nocturnal habits, many experienced hobbyists target feed their pleco’s once or twice a week with tablet or disc foods given at night. For best results feed a variety of high quality foods, and rotate your fishes’ diet daily.

Breeding Level – Difficult
While not much is known about the spawning behavior of many rarer species, a fair number of suckermouth catfish have been bred in captivity. They typically spawn in caves, with the male caring for the eggs until they hatch. Fry are voracious and must be fed frequently on a high protein diet such as microworms, brine shrimp nauplii, sinking tablets or disc-type foods. For intentional spawning, a separate aquarium should be set up and breeders should be fed live or frozen foods for several weeks to condition them.