

Piranha

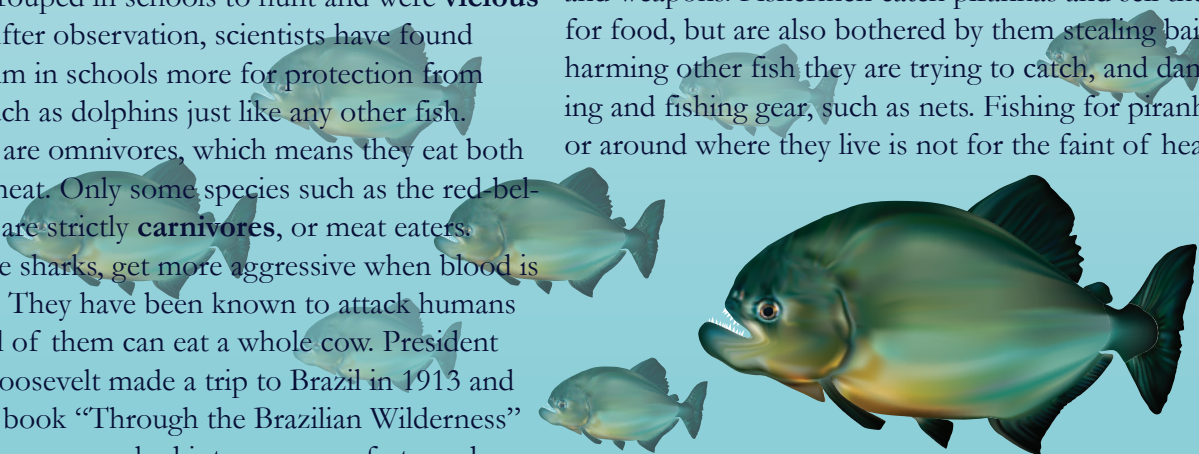
Piranhas are mostly freshwater fish that live in rivers, lakes, and some coastal areas of the Amazon Basin in South America. Some have been seen in the United States in the Potomac River and the Lake of the Ozarks in Missouri, and one was caught near Staten Island in New York City. Piranhas have also been seen in Kaptai Lake in Bangladesh and Lijiang River in China. How these piranhas got so far from their native Amazon rivers is still being questioned.

Piranhas are usually $5\frac{1}{2}$ to $10\frac{1}{4}$ inches long, but have been seen as large as 17 inches. They are best known for their sharp, triangular teeth. People used to think they grouped in schools to hunt and were **vicious** predators. After observation, scientists have found piranhas swim in schools more for protection from predators such as dolphins just like any other fish.

Piranhas are omnivores, which means they eat both plants and meat. Only some species such as the red-bellied piranha are strictly **carnivores**, or meat eaters. Piranhas, like sharks, get more aggressive when blood is in the water. They have been known to attack humans and a school of them can eat a whole cow. President Theodore Roosevelt made a trip to Brazil in 1913 and wrote in his book "Through the Brazilian Wilderness" about seeing a cow pushed into a group of starved

piranhas. He spoke of seeing the piranhas fished up on deck and how they squealed and continued to try to bite anything they could. Roosevelt described them as "a short, deep-bodied fish, with a blunt face and a...projecting lower jaw which gapes widely. The razor-edged teeth are wedge-shaped like a shark's, and the jaw muscles possess great power. ... Furious snaps drive the teeth through flesh and bone."

It is no wonder biologists and experts warn people to be careful in any rivers, lakes, or coastal areas where piranhas may live. Still, many people **indigenous** to South America have used piranha teeth to make tools and weapons. Fishermen catch piranhas and sell them for food, but are also bothered by them stealing bait, harming other fish they are trying to catch, and damaging and fishing gear, such as nets. Fishing for piranhas or around where they live is not for the faint of heart!



1. **New terms:** See how these three terms are used in the text, and write a definition next to each one.

vicious

carnivores

indigenous

2. Where are piranhas indigenous? _____

3. Which U.S. president wrote about piranhas in a book? _____

4. It is safe to swim with piranhas.

True or False?