

MY STORY

A Whole Lotl Love

A story of two axolotls

BY Lisa Ikin

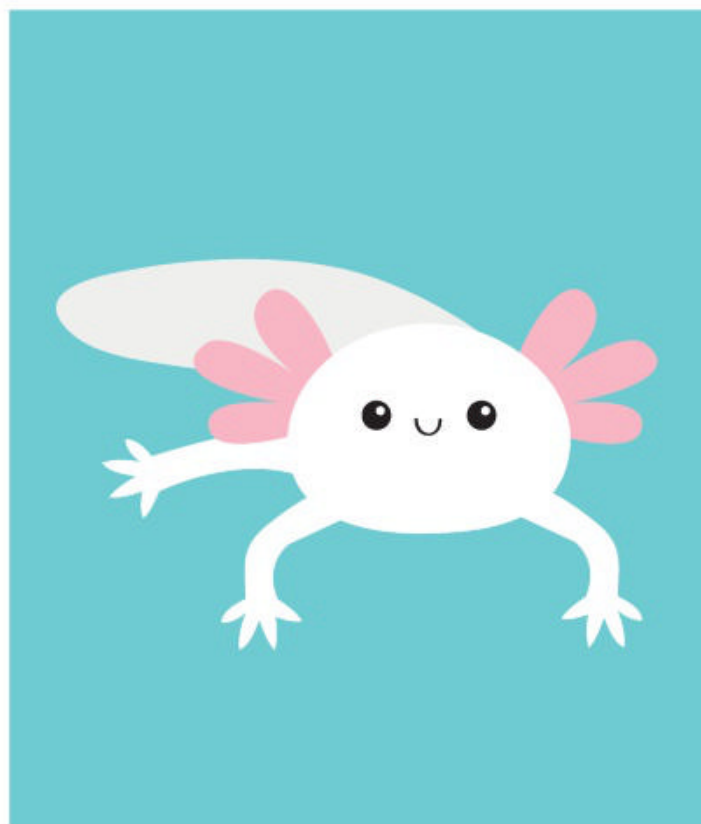
AXOLOTLs, otherwise known as Mexican walking fish, are very peculiar creatures indeed. *Ambystoma Mexicanum* are neotenic; they retain juvenile traits right through their adult lives and never leave the water like their amphibious cousins. They are naturally occurring but rarely seen in Lake Xochimilco and Lake Chalco in the southern Mexico City neighbourhood of Xochimilco. The most common place you will see an axolotl is in a home fish tank.

I have owned and (accidentally) bred axolotls for over eight years. My interest in these four-legged amphibians began in 2011 when I inherited two ageing axolotls,

Jet and Rusty, from a teaching colleague. Following their passing, I observed an appropriate period of mourning and the following year purchased an albino axolotl.

'Muesli Aristotle' arrived at Quintilian Primary School in January 2012. She was named by a group of nine year olds who couldn't settle on just one name. One school holiday, when Muesli was at home with me for the long break, I discovered an axolotl looking for a new home on Facebook. In return for a carton of Hahn Premium beer, I had a friend for Muesli. I named it quite fittingly 'Hahn' and plopped it in the tank with Muesli.

I watched with interest as they circled one another, and I made the





appropriate “oohs” and “aahs” as they brushed against one another in the tank. “*Friends!*” I thought. Blissfully unaware of what was to happen next.

The following morning, I noticed sacs of white jelly deposited on the bottom of the tank and noted that Hahn had been responsible for these slimy gifts. I also saw that Muesli had turned bright pink and was gliding around settling on each sac before moving onto the next.

Curiosity took over and I decided

Lisa Ikin is a freelance writer and primary school teacher from Perth. She teaches science and volunteers for wildlife organisations in her spare time. Axolotls are still very much a part of her life.

to leave them to their own devices to see what would happen.

The next morning, Hahn was sitting gazing disinterestedly at the plastic plant while Muesli appeared agitated and had started laying thousands of frog-like eggs! As I madly googled what to do with baby axolotls it quickly became apparent that this was not going to be a walk in the park. Not only did Google suggest that I would have to remove the slippery eggs, but I had to hand raise them! Axolotls, it turns out, are not very parental and will eat their eggs and young. No wonder they are all but extinct in the wild.

I removed Hahn from the tank and placed him in quarantine. He had more than made his presence felt. Pondering what to do with the imminent axolotl babies, my calculating entrepreneurial mind sold each one for \$50 and then spent the resulting fortune on a tropical holiday.

More googling revealed that newly hatched axolotls needed to be fed live food. All websites pointed towards the farming of brine shrimp (sea monkeys to the uninitiated). Brine shrimp were a whole other kettle of fish – literally. “They need salt water, and the saltwater needs to be aerated,” said the kind man in the aquarium shop as he handed me a vial of brine shrimp eggs. He also gave me a list of instructions on how to get the water just the right type

of salty. I gave him a sideways look and said, "Can't I just go and fill up a bottle at the beach?"

"That would work," he nodded.

Armed with seawater, an aerator and some brine shrimp eggs, I set up a bubbling contraption on my kitchen bench and waited. Fourteen days after the first batch of axolotl eggs were spawned, I started to see tiny tadpole-like creatures emerge from their gel sacs and dart about the tank. The brine shrimp did the right thing and turned into dancing, microscopic shrimp. As the baby axolotls grew, I had to change their water twice daily and feed them at the same time. This was achieved with a kitchen sieve and a lot of splashing. Along with trips to the beach to harvest sea water, all was progressing swimmingly. That was until the babies reached the size of goldfish and started to eat each other's limbs. They are not known for their good eyesight and snap at anything that moves. Luckily, they regenerate their limbs and body parts. As I said, very peculiar creatures, indeed.

I knew that if my tropical holiday was to become a reality, each juvenile would have to be housed in a separate enclosure if they were to maintain all their limbs. No one was going to want to pay \$50 for a legless

axolotl. Back to the aquarium shop, where I had already spent a small fortune, to purchase a third tank and more aerating filters.

My kitchen bench was beginning to look like something from a sci-fi movie, alien life forms sitting in ice-cube trays and takeaway containers. My family was getting used to making their breakfast in a small corner of the bench.

MY KITCHEN BENCH LOOKED LIKE SOMETHING FROM A SCI-FI MOVIE

When the juveniles reached the age where I could advertise them for sale in the local pets page, it seemed that every axolotl breeder was doing the same. A price war ensued.

One for \$30, two for \$40. Buy one axolotl, get one free!

I sold some, probably enough to break even. The likes of the people who answered my ads are a whole other story; it turns out axolotl owners are slightly quirky. Who would have guessed?

Hahn was rehoused, and Muesli now has one of her daughters as a companion. The skills I learnt from this experience are countless but the lesson is: don't count your axolotls before they hatch. **R**

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