



PETER SINGER

Free fish from their pain and suffering

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When I was a child, my father used to take me for walks, often along a river or by the sea. We would pass people fishing, perhaps reeling in struggling fish hooked at the end of their lines.

Once, I saw a man take a small fish out of a bucket and impale it, still wriggling, on a hook to use as bait. Another time, when our path took us by a tranquil stream, I saw a man sitting and watching his line, seemingly at peace with the world, while fish he had already caught were flapping helplessly next him and gasping in the air. My father told me that he could not understand how anyone could enjoy an afternoon spent taking fish out of the water and letting them die slowly.

These childhood memories flooded back when I read a breakthrough report, titled Worse things happen at sea: the welfare of wild-caught fish, that was released last month on fishcount.org.uk. In most of the world, it is accepted that if animals are to be killed for food, they should be killed without suffering. Regulations for slaughter generally require that animals be rendered instantly unconscious before they are killed, or that death should be brought about instantaneously, or, in the case of ritual slaughter, as close to instantaneously as the religious doctrine allows.

Not for fish. There is no humane slaughter requirement for wild fish caught and killed at sea, nor, in most places, for farmed fish.

Fish caught in nets by trawlers are dumped on board the ship and allowed to suffocate. Impaling live bait on hooks is a common commercial practice: Long-line fishing, for example, uses hundreds or even thousands of hooks on a single line that may be 50 to 100 kilometres long. When fish take the bait, they are likely to remain caught for many hours before the line is hauled in.

Likewise, commercial fishing frequently depends on gill nets – walls of fine netting in which fish become snared, often by the gills. They may suffocate in the net, because, with their gills constricted, they cannot breathe. If not, they may remain trapped for many hours before the nets are pulled in.

The most startling revelation in the report, however, is the staggering number of fish on which humans inflict these deaths. By using the reported

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tonnages of the various species of fish caught and dividing by the estimated average weight for each species, Alison Mood, the report's author, has put together what may well be the first-ever systematic estimate of the size of the annual global capture of wild fish. It is, she calculates, in the order of one trillion, although it could be as high as 2.7 trillion.

To put this in perspective, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that 60 billion animals are killed each year for human consumption – the equivalent of about nine animals for each person on the planet. If we take Ms. Mood's lower estimate of one trillion, the comparable figure for fish is 150. This does not include billions of fish caught illegally, nor unwanted fish caught accidentally and discarded, nor fish impaled on hooks as bait.

Many of these fish are consumed indirectly – ground up and fed to factory-farmed chicken or fish. A typical salmon farm churns through three to four kilograms of wild fish for every kilogram of salmon it produces.

Let's assume that all this fishing is sustainable, though, of course, it is not. It would then be reassuring to believe that killing on such a vast scale does not matter because fish do not feel pain. But the nervous systems of fish are sufficiently similar to those of birds and mammals to suggest that they do. When fish experience something that would cause other animals physical pain, they behave in ways suggestive of pain, and the change in behaviour may last several hours. (It is a myth that fish have short memories.) Fish learn to avoid unpleasant experiences, such as electric shocks. And painkillers reduce the symptoms of pain they would otherwise show.

Victoria Braithwaite, a professor of fisheries and biology at Pennsylvania State University, has probably spent more time investigating this issue than any other scientist. Her recent book *Do Fish Feel Pain?* shows that fish are not only capable of feeling pain, but also are a lot smarter than most people believe. Last year, a scientific panel for the European Union concluded that the preponderance of the evidence indicates that fish do feel pain.

Why are fish the forgotten victims on our plate? Is it because they are cold-blooded and covered in scales? Is it because they cannot give voice to their pain? Whatever the explanation, the evidence is now accumulating that commercial fishing inflicts an unimaginable amount of pain and suffering. We need to learn how to capture and kill wild fish humanely – or, if that is not possible, to find less cruel and more sustainable alternatives to eating them.

Peter Singer is a professor of bioethics at Princeton University and laureate professor at the University of Melbourne.

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