

■ | Hunting, Fishing, and Trapping

Sport Fishing

Many humans interact with fish on a regular basis, although for most people, this is not an intimate relationship, what with fish being cold blooded, slimy, and inhabiting an alien, water world in which humans travel with difficulty. Despite that, fish have been a mainstay of human diets for time immemorial. They have driven the symbolism and life rhythms of entire cultures, such as those for many of North America's Pacific Coast First Nations whose year revolves around the Pacific salmon. In the Western world, dieticians and health gurus are telling us that if we want to lead long, happy lives, we need to eat more fish rich in heart-friendly omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids. But for the most part, we modern humans undergo our interactions with fish at the seafood counter at the local supermarket, where our piscine "friends" generally arrive filleted and skinned from industrial commercial fisheries or aquaculture operations.

It wasn't always this way. For millennia the primary interaction people had with fish was entering the fish's world and coming up with ways to catch them. The modern, technology-driven fishing fleets of today are a far cry from the one-on-one struggle that for most of human history dominated the capturing of fish. However, at some point during human history, people consciously or unconsciously came to the realization that the process of fishing was pleasant, even spiritual. Out of this was born the pastime of sport fishing, the quest of an individual angler armed with a fishing rod to capture a fish.

The earliest sport fishing record we have, at least in the English language, is Dame Juliana Berners *The Treatyse of Fysshynge with an Angle*. Dame Juliana was reportedly a nun and prioress from an abbey in Hertfordshire, England, but there is dispute over whether or not she actually existed. Some believe that the name is a pseudonym for the true author who wished to remain anonymous. The book definitely exists, is written in the English language style of the fifteenth century, and appeared in 1496. The *Treatyse's* primary purpose was to inspire people to go sport fishing, but it also was the start and inspiration for the voluminous English-language angling literature that continues to pour forth to this day.

Consistent with the prioress theory, Dame Juliana starts her treatise by quoting the parables of Solomon, noting in particular that a healthy, happy, righteous life flowed from a beauty of spirit ("a good spyrite maketh a flouring age that is a fayre age and a longe"). She believed that to achieve that beauty a person needed to pursue activities that nurtured the spirit ("a mery occupacion which may rejoice his harte, and in which his spirites may haue a mery delyte"). Not for her the contemporary popular pastimes among the noble-born of hunting, hawking, or fowling, which were "laborious and greuous (grievous)" occupations and did not get people out of bed early enough to be "holy, helthy & happy." Angling was the ticket, and in her how-to book she takes prospective anglers with simplicity and great accuracy through the equipment and techniques needed, on a species-by-species basis, for catching fish with a fishing pole. She even includes a description of the first reported artificial flies and the materials needed to tie them.

Sport anglers today are more or less divided into two major groups: those with "hardware" and those devoted to "fly fishing." Hardware fishermen use a variety of artificial metal lures and/or baits to try and entice a fish to get caught. The equipment is primarily designed to securely hook and retain a fish, and the intent is to take it home and eat it.

The fly fisherman approaches the sport differently. Fly fishing is full of social hierarchies, elaborate rituals, and techniques that have to be perfected in order to become a

“respectable” fly fisherman. You must master fly tying, which requires artistic capacities, manual dexterity, and a house full of esoteric materials such as jungle cock feathers and polar bear hair that can be woven into the “dress” of an effective artificial fly. You must equip yourself from head to toe, including waders, a fishing vest stuffed with tools, and a stylish hat. You need to obtain a fly rod and reel and through patience and hard work develop the motions that cast a nearly weightless fly accurately to the places in the water where the fish are lying. Being a fly fisherman can have curious impacts on people’s psyche, as Fen Montaigne noted for Atlantic salmon fly fishermen: “In the angling world, there is no snob like an Atlantic salmon snob. And while being mindful not to tar all Atlantic-salmon fishermen with the same brush, the truth is this: many devotees of the “sport of kings” are insufferable, elitist, tweedy, name-dropping bores” (p. 41).

Fly fishing goes on in unlikely places, under unlikely circumstances, and with unlikely species. Atlantic salmon anglers were among the first wave of westerners to enter Russia when the Soviet Union dissolved. They were seeking the undisturbed rivers of the Kola Peninsula, and in those turbulent times some of them found themselves being escorted back out of the country at gun point. Fly fishing sport camps have been established in the Amazon River basin for Peacock Bass, and at least one of them has been overrun by guerillas, with the anglers escaping to the jungle. Salt water fly fishermen prize bonefish, and some are now even pioneering techniques for catching sharks!

Sport fishing is big business. In North America people spend millions of days and billions of dollars each year on fishing trips. These expenditures create valuable employment in rural areas for guides and small businesses, such as hotels and restaurants, and play to the traditional nature-oriented skills of people in these regions such as boat handling and river navigation. Since people take care of the things that they value, the economic benefits of sport fishing provide a powerful incentive to conserve fish populations and maintain clean water.

Recent surveys of recreational anglers consistently show that the thing they value the most is not catching a fish. Rather, it is the joy of being in the natural world and the gentle pace of life on the water. They are seeking to massage their spirits, which is what Dame Juliana recommended over 500 years ago.

Some anglers so prize the fishing experience and the conservation of fish populations that they can no longer bring themselves to kill a fish that they have caught. This has given rise to the practice of live release (also known as catch-and-release). Simply put, live release means that you treat a fish gently as you reel it up next to your boat or into a net, that you remove the hook as quickly as possible preferably without taking the fish out of the water to minimize stress, and that you then let it swim back into the wild. Many studies have shown that many species of fish treated this way will survive, reproduce, and even be caught again by anglers a second or more times. However, although live release has proved to be a successful and valuable conservation tool, it has not been without controversy.

Humans have to eat, and most societies accept the capture of fish for consumption as an ethical and necessary human behavior. However, recently some people have questioned the ethics of live-release fishing, irrespective of the conservation and water quality benefits that the presence of a sport fishery can bring. If you are not going to consume the fish, then is it cruelty to capture them by impaling them on a metal hook, forcibly coerce them up to wherever the angler happens to be positioned, and then release them to the wild to try and do the same again? A key component of the cruelty argument revolves around fish “awareness” and whether or not they feel pain. The available scientific evidence is conflicting and contradictory. Some hold that the neural system and brain of fish are not sufficiently developed to experience pain and awareness (Rose,

2002). However, recent experiments generated results that were consistent with fish detecting and nonreflexively attempting to avoid noxious stimuli and pain (Sneddon, 2003; Sneddon et al., 2003). Scientific work is ongoing in this important field, and there is a great deal at stake.

See also

Hunting, Fishing, and Trapping—*Fishing and Human Attitudes*

Further Resources

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Fred Whoriskey

Hunting, Fishing, and Trapping Trapping Animals*

American history is filled with images of adventurous trappers braving the wilds of colonial North America and paving the way for settlement of the continent. These images persist, invoking notions of the pioneer spirit. The legacy of the fur trade, however, tells quite a different story.

The Early Fur Trade

Commercial trapping for wildlife in North America began during the initial occupation by European explorers and colonists, although it wasn't until 1581 that the first ship arrived on the continent with the purpose of delivering animal furs to Europe. Profits

*This entry has been adapted from a chapter entitled "Trapping in North America: A Historical Overview" from the book *Cull of the Wild: A Contemporary Analysis of Wildlife Trapping in the United States* published by the Animal Protection Institute (2004).

Encyclopedia of Human-Animal Relationships

A Global Exploration of Our Connections
with Animals

Volume 3: Eth-Liv

Edited by
Marc Bekoff



GREENWOOD PRESS
Westport, Connecticut • London