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EAA POSITION PAPER ON ANIMAL WELFARE

Angling is big in Europe. Not only does it generate high economic value, but it is also an invaluable activity in terms of mental and physical well-being for millions of Europeans.¹ Angling and other human activities can have an impact on underwater life and can affect the welfare of fish. The EAA has high regard for the welfare and wellbeing of fish. Therefore, it is important to share knowledge about fish welfare and apply best practices to minimize any effects of angling on fish welfare.

Fishing & Angling

Worldwide, it is assumed that 11.5% of the population engage in angling.² There are over 25 million anglers fishing in European waters. Angling is the act of trying to catch fish, possibly for the table, using a line and a hook. For most anglers it also involves the use of a rod or pole and often a reel to hold the line. The broader concept of fishing, which can also be recreational fishing, includes all legitimate methods of capturing fish and can include nets, traps, and long lines, with many hooks. Recreational anglers use only rod and line for their pastime. Compared to other fishing techniques such as nets or longlines, angling is highly species and size selective. It is recognized as one of the least harmful techniques in respect of animal welfare. Survival rates of released fish are high.

Animal welfare

The term “animal welfare” is being used increasingly by corporations, consumers, veterinarians, politicians, and others. However, the term can mean different things to different people. The most widely accepted definition of animal welfare is that it encompasses the state of the animal's body and mind, and the extent to which its nature (genetic traits manifested in breed and temperament) is satisfied. In this way, some physical suffering, such as feeling cold, and mental suffering, such as the fear induced by being preyed upon, may be acceptable as long as the animals can live according to their nature and perform their full range of behaviours.³

¹ Recreational Fisheries Across Europe, ICES infographic, 2023

² Cooke, S. J., & Cowx, I. G. (2004). The role of recreational fishing in global fish crises. *BioScience*, 54, 857-859.

³ Hewson CJ. What is animal welfare? Common definitions and their practical consequences. *Can Vet J.* 2003 Jun;44(6):496-9. PMID: 12839246; PMCID: PMC340178.

Angling and fish welfare

Anglers aim to catch fish. By catching fish, they may have an impact on those fish they catch. The fish might get stressed or receive injury, and the angler might want to take the fish as a food source. The impact of angling on fish cannot be denied, but is short when compared to the lifespan of a fish; the time between hooking the fish and releasing, or killing it in the gentlest known way is only a couple of minutes or shorter in most cases. This means that angling only impacts the welfare of the fish for a short time and does not limit their natural behaviour. Recent studies have shown that the impact of catching and releasing fish is small and that there was no negative effect on migration and spawning success.⁴ However, the amount of impact anglers have on an individual fish greatly depends on the way the fish is being handled and the gear being used.⁵ It is therefore of great importance that anglers follow best practice in handling the fish. Angling organisations have developed codes of conduct and rules to minimise any negative impact on fish welfare and are actively promoting fish welfare through guidelines to safe handling and release, the ready availability of fish treatment kits which many anglers carry, teaching young anglers how to handle fish and reducing the use of retention systems for fish not intended for the table.

Angling for wild fish is an important and valuable food source for people. As a food product, home-caught fish fulfils all the criteria of the modern spirit of the times like no other. Home-caught fish is fresh, local, sustainable, wholesome, climate-friendly and grows up in a species-appropriate manner. No wonder more and more people catch their own fish.

Other impacts on fish welfare

The EAA believes that fish welfare should be considered at both the individual and the population level. Fish welfare discussions often focus on the individual animal, but we should also be concerned about fish at a population level. If the fish do not thrive and reproduce eventually there will be no fish to care for.

While angling may have only a short impact on individual fish welfare and rarely affects the population, conversely other human activities can have a major impact on the welfare of fish at both individual and population levels. Man-made constructions and activities have a major impact on the aquatic environment, affecting fish migration, reproduction, and habitat availability. Pollution can kill fish and the invertebrate populations on which they depend within minutes, and there are also sub-lethal effects that impact at a population level. Land drainage schemes or hydro-electric installations can destroy complex habitats that have evolved over thousands of years.

People protect what they love, they love what they understand and they understand what they are taught.” – Jacques-Yves Cousteau

⁴ For instance: Rarysson, A. (2020). How is catch and release fishing affecting the northern pike (*Esox lucius*)? (Dissertation). Retrieved from <https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:lnu:diva-96042> & Sass G.G. (2018), Effects of catch-and-release angling on a largemouth bass (*Micropterus salmoides*) population in a north temperate lake, 2001–2005, Fisheries research 204 (2018), p. 95-102

⁵ Matthew J. Smukall, Amy Shaw, and Donald C. Behringer. 2019. Effect of simulated catch-and-release angling on postrelease mortality and egg viability in sockeye salmon (*Oncorhynchus nerka*). Canadian Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences. 76(12): 2390-2395. <https://doi.org/10.1139/cjfas-2018-0426>

Anglers, through their acquired knowledge and regular contact with aquatic ecosystems, are often the first to detect signs of pollution or fish disease/distress and are at the forefront of seeking regulation and control to limit external impacts on fish and its habitat. In turn, angling organisations play an important role as conservationists. Through their lobbying for good water quality and quantity, the protection of aquatic habitats, their campaigns against commercial over-exploitation, and their stewardship of still and flowing waters, angling organisations are at the forefront of the maintaining and improving of water bodies, supported by tens of thousands of volunteer anglers working in the field on conservation projects. In the appendix you will find a shortlist of activities and actions undertaken by EAA and its member organisations to improve the welfare of fish.

The EAA and its members are committed to the welfare of fish populations, and we believe that fish welfare can be guaranteed by anglers. Anglers protect fish welfare because they have been taught best practices, they understand the underwater world and they love fish.