



Angling and the issue of cruelty

A new report suggests that fish may feel pain. Is this a good reason to ban Britain's most popular pastime?

THE banning of angling is as preposterous an idea as the banning of foxhunting. Angling provides an opportunity for 3.5 million people to get in touch with their hunter-gatherer streak and become a part of their landscape; many of these are townsmen who have no other stake in the life of the countryside. The money from licences goes to regenerate and maintain our rivers, many of which have been in a sad state. The government-backed initiative Get Hooked On Fishing hopes to draw our desperate youth from kicking up hell on the streets to appreciating and loving, thus caring for, our waters, and I wish it well.

Let us keep our fishing, our hunting and other field sports, for without them we become perilously distanced from our roots.

Fiona Cameron, Tewkesbury, Gloucestershire

Unlikely experiences

I STUDIED the behaviour of marine fish for many years in the 1960s and 1970s and I remain unconvinced that fish perceive pain in the sense that we understand it. It appears that all that has been demonstrated in the Roslin Institute research (report, April 30) is a sensitivity to various stimuli (many of which, such as bee sting and acetic acid, would never be experienced by fish in nature) and avoidance responses to such stimuli. The question that has to be asked is whether fish, mostly living in a uniform aquatic environment, would be likely to have evolved a system of pain sensors linked to a special brain centre in order to warn them of stimuli that they are unlikely to experience.

During our studies, we observed fish behaviour in relation to baited hooks. A pair of hooks were laid on the sea bed and observed by underwater television camera. A cod took the first bait, became hooked, wriggled for a while and then escaped. It then went straight to the next hook and again took the bait and was caught again. In other experiments, we caught large numbers of young cod on rod and line, tagged them with a plastic ribbon inserted into the body musculature and then returned them to the sea. A fair number of these cod were recaptured by us within an hour of release.

There is no evidence from these observations that fish, such as cod, suffer any ill-effects from being caught by baited hook. These experiments would be worth repeating. I can see no justification for banning angling. Incidentally, I am not an angler myself.

Dr Colin Chapman, Milltimber, Aberdeenshire

Pain is not the issue

THE issue at stake is not whether fish feel pain. We may never know for certain if animals of all kinds feel pain or feel it in the same way that we do, given that their experience of consciousness appears to be so different from ours.

The question is whether it is acceptable in a civilised society for animals to be hunted for sport. Do we see animals alongside humans as living creatures that should be treated with dignity and

respect or do we think they have been put there for our entertainment? The two views are not compatible.

I cannot accept the implication of your debate that it's fine to torment animals as long as they don't feel pain. We degrade them, and ourselves, by deriving pleasure from hunting them, whether they feel pain or not.

But we should be clear and consistent on these issues. If we feel that hunting other creatures for sport is barbaric and uncivilised, then we should ban all forms of hunting whether in water, on land or in the air. On the other hand, if, as a society as a whole, we are not prepared for whatever reasons to ban all hunting, then we should not ban some forms of it only. The fact that, say, a hare is higher up the evolutionary scale than a fish, which makes it easier for us to conclude scientifically and emotionally that it experiences being hunted in the way that we would, is not a reason for banning hare-coursing while allowing angling.

Finally, your fishing correspondent's claim that if we ban angling we cannot eat meat or use leather any more is untenable. The question of whether we should kill animals as humanely as possible to provide for our physical needs,



important though it is, has nothing to do with the issue of whether we should be allowed to maltreat them purely for our amusement.

Kieran McCann,
Brighton, East Sussex

Foregone conclusion?

YOUR headline "The hook hurts — will anglers feel the pain?" and story content read as though you have already made up your mind.

It's only at the end of your article that you put the view of Professor James Rose. Dr Lynne Sneddon has proved only that fish respond to stimuli, which is not surprising as they need to survive in the wild. But if a fish lacks the necessary part of the brain, how can it feel pain?

On the lower Severn we see fish habitat being destroyed by an irresponsible boating faction hell-bent on using the river as a motorway. It's the anglers who have to urge the boats to keep to legal speed limits. If nothing happens to prevent this there will be no fish left to feel anything.

Tony Marris, Hanley Swan,
Worcestershire

Guarding the environment

IF ANGLING had not been a pastime in recent history it is doubtful whether there would be any salmon or trout left in the rivers of the UK. It seems that the only people who care about the continuing existence of these species are those who angle for them.

After they have managed to ban these sports, I doubt that the anti-angling groups will hang around the banks of rivers and lochs to keep a watch on the effects of pollution and changes in environment as anglers do in the pursuit of their sport.

John G. Marshall, Edinburgh

Pointless barbarity

SO, scientists at the Roslin Institute have discovered that if you inject a poison into a fish, reactions will occur that may be detected with their scientific instruments. They also discovered that there was no reaction when the fish were injected with a harmless saline solution.

If this proves anything, it is that fish suffer distress from a poison (eg, pollution), but do not react to the syringe itself

(the hook). Anglers will be shocked at the pointless barbarity of these experiments, while the non-angling general public will not give them a second thought as they continue to tuck into their crushed and suffocated cod.

Will the so-called animal activists now be preparing to abandon their picket of Huntingdon Life Sciences and embark upon the long trek up to Edinburgh University? Probably not, as they know that the non-angling public would treat their efforts with apathy or derision. This is why it is always left to angling bodies to fight for the long-term preservation of the fishes' habitat, against the pernicious effects of pollution and abstraction. The public complain only in the aftermath, when they are offended by the smell of all the rotting fish.

Peter Sharpe,
Bourne, Lincolnshire

Man the culprit

ONE must question the real motive of the anti-hunting lobby. I suspect it has more to do with envy than humanitarian considerations, so it follows that angling must be the next target.

Being a trusting and gullible person, I must accept that all plant life feels pain. After all, we know that is true because Prince Charles has regular dialogue with the plant kingdom. Therefore, logic tells us that following the banning of hunting with dogs and catching fish, vegetable and fruit are next on the hit list.

This leads us to the identification of the true culprits of this cruel persecution — man, of course. That's where we all came in, so the end of the world is really nigh.

Do-gooders, get real!

Keith Douglas, Solihull

Life is cruel — live with it

THE whole issue of animal cruelty has gone mad. Nature is cruel, life is cruel and we cannot expect to control cruelty in the natural world. All those people who wish to ban fishing should consider the issues before jumping to conclusions.

I fish only for game, which I eat unless requested to return the quarry for conservation of the species. This is considerably less cruel than commercial fishing, where the fish suffocate slowly. If fishing were ever banned here I would seriously have to consider leaving the country because I

would have doubts as to whether I was still living in a democracy.

Carl Eastwood, Banbury, Oxfordshire

Expert view

IN early 1984 I read an article in which the author described in great detail the agony suffered by a fish while it was "played" after being hooked. The article was not written by or for an animal rights body. It was published in *The Field* and was the considered view of that periodical's angling correspondent and former editor.

T. D. Thompson, Guildford, Surrey

Let's end this suffering

I HAVE always loathed the idea of a fish in its own environment suffering a sharp barbed hook in its mouth and being hauled to a death by suffocation, all in the name of sport. Unfortunately, the fact that fish feel pain will not persuade the brave anglers to give up their cruel hobby. So, please, let's get it mercifully banned.

Sylvia Ives, Brighton, East Sussex

Poor science

IF fish feel pain, how is it that a hooked fish will try to swim away from the angler rather than follow the pull of the line? Furthermore, fish take all sorts of sharp objects (eg, sticklebacks) into their mouths when feeding. Pain? Nonsense.

The latest research report into fish and pain is in the same bracket as the reports that claim that the explosion in magpie numbers has no effect on songbird populations and similarly brings science into disrepute.

John West, Wotton-under-Edge,
Gloucestershire