

Fishing and Animal Welfare – The debate is here

Fishing and hunting generally involve the catching and killing of wild animals. Just a few generations ago this was an essential skill for many of our ancestors who relied on food from the wild to support their families. Most fish we eat now are fish caught from the wild.

In the western world there is an increasing concern about animal welfare. Much of this started with concern over spectacles such as bear baiting, and more recently the method of capture such as gin traps or the conditions in factory farms. In some countries this has moved on now to amateur hunting and fishing, particularly if what you are catching is large or beautiful.

New Zealand has a relatively new Animal Welfare Act and there are a few people that feel so strongly about hunting and fishing that they will threaten to use the Animal Welfare Act to stop a particular fishing practice. However, fishing is legal in New Zealand and all other countries.

An argument that some opponents put forward says that long capture times, as may occur with light line classes, or especially large fish, unnecessarily prolongs the suffering of the fish for the enjoyment of the angler and they ask why would a person choose to do this?

TV3 and a particular reporter have picked up this story and will run their “exposé” on deep sea angling on the programme **60 Minutes this Monday, 18th October at 7.30 pm**. As with much of this sort of journalism they are looking for a “shock horror” story.

From the contact between fishers and the TV crew to date, there is concern that the story will be unbalanced and focus on the pain a fish experiences when hooked. This may upset the animal protection groups and may also upset recreational fishers and a public argument may erupt after the programme.

Here is some information that may inform any discussion over the back fence or at work on animal welfare and deep sea fishing.

- Fishing is legal in New Zealand and all other countries.
- Recreational fishers need to consider the welfare of individual fish they catch. The conservation of the populations and species of fish in our waters are however of greater concern to all New Zealanders. The impact of anglers on fish populations is small compared to commercial fishing and natural mortality.
- Fish have the nerve cells that help them sense the environment around them. Some of these are in the mouth and are connected to the brain
- A fish’s brain does not have cerebral cortex which is used in humans to interpret these sensory signals as a painful experience or perception of pain.
- Fish do feel something and react to noxious compounds or tissue damage but their perception is different to what you or I feel as pain.
- Fish do react to being on a line, often by swimming strongly away or jumping. This response is also demonstrated by marlin (for example) that have their bill wrapped in the trace and are not hooked.
- Many fish are designed for periods of rapid swimming and exertion to catch prey and recover quickly.
- Indications from satellite tagging of striped marlin in New Zealand are that they survive catch and release well.

- Recreational fishers are working on a code of practice with the National Animal Ethics Advisory Committee (Min of Ag and Forestry, Animal Welfare division) even though the Act gives an exemption to hunting and fishing.

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