

Catch and Deny

Heart of Home 2003

by Ted Kerasote

Jack Turner, who looks like a cross between a jolly medieval monk and the Buddha, gave up trout fishing because of birds.

“It was in Berkeley;” he says, “maybe ‘88 or ‘89. I heard this recording done by the Royal Academy or someone like that. It was of fish being caught and trying to escape. You didn’t have to be an expert to know that these were creatures in distress. The only thing I could think of was birds:”

It’s after dinner, and we’re standing on the town square of Jackson, Wyoming, which is virtually empty because it’s April and off-season. Turner, one of the principal guides at the Exum School of Mountaineering, based just north of town in Grand Teton National Park, wears his usual tweedy coat, T-shirt, and shortly trimmed white beard, making him look both weathered and wise. Besides having led hundreds of climbers up the Grand Teton, Turner is also known for his mountain explorations (he was the first American to reach the north side of K2), his retrospects of the early days of Yosemite climbing, and lately his lyric writings on everything from Buddhism to the lives of white pelicans. He has also been a fishing junkie since the age of four.

“Trout, eels, everything,” he says. His grandfather was halfowner of a Pennsylvania fishing and hunting lodge, and Turner grew up with a

rod in his hand before turning to the mountains and teaching philosophy. It was his bent for philosophy, for making unusual connections and disquieting comparisons, that finally caught up to him.

“When I first read defenses of catch-and-release fishing” he explains, “when it became really popular maybe fifteen years ago, I had my first inkling that I didn’t want to do it. It seemed like a continuation of a utilitarian philosophy that maximizes value for the group and ignores the individual. It’s the perennial scientific attitude as well. Biologists don’t worry about individuals. They worry about species, ecosystems.

“Then I heard that recording and it made me imagine using worms and flies to catch mountain bluebirds or pine grosbeaks, or maybe eagles and ospreys, and hauling them around on fifty feet of line while they tried to get away. Then when you landed them, you’d release them. No one would tolerate that sort of thing with birds. But we will for fish because they’re underwater, out of sight”

Sometime after listening to the recording, Turner sold his fishing gear—Winston rods mounted with Hardy reels, the best of fine trout tackle. “It breaks my heart to talk about it” he says flatly.

The renunciation was too much too

soon. He bought back his rods, used them for two more seasons, and couldn’t stand how he felt about what he was doing to fish. He sold everything again. Even so, he’s not sure the sale is final.

“I may buy back my nine-foot-six Winston and go out for a trout dinner, or catch whitefish for a stew, going out with the idea specifically to hunt a fish to eat it. I’m not opposed to hunting-killing fish for food. In fact, I don’t think hunting to eat IS immoral—to go out, for instance, with a shotgun to kill a dove and eat it—because all life survives by killing and consuming other life. But this idea of playing with things for our own enjoyment while they go through great anguish and suffering strikes me as wrong”

Turner is a member of a Zen Buddhist school that doesn’t value life-forms by their sentience. Insects, shrimp, cows, people, trees, rocks, and mountains “all deserve our care and attention” He does, however, distinguish between instrumental and gratuitous pain-killing a fish to feed your gut and playing with a fish to feed your ego.

He now throws open his hands, taking in the town square, the valley, and places beyond. “As a culture we’re addicted to fun” he says, “and have a hard time placing amusement in a secondary place to other values, the good of the environment for instance, or the suffering of other beings, even when we recognize those values as important”

Turner isn’t alone in feeling uncomfortable about catch-and-release fishing. A few days later, I’m in Montana, talking with David Quammen, whose quirky and poetic essays on nature have appeared in *Outside* for years. Like someone going through a divorce or a serious illness, I’m looking for a support group, people who have lived and lusted for fishing and are now going through the

same sort of withdrawal that I've been experiencing.

Quammen and I sit in the old Chico Hot Springs Lodge, commanding a bench above the Yellowstone River where it meanders through Paradise Valley. It's one of those April evenings when the last bit of warm sun makes you believe that winter is really coming to a close. As with Turner, I ask Quammen the question that no one in the fishing world really likes addressing because of the Pandora's box it opens: If fish do feel pain, as some evidence has begun to suggest, what does the catch-and-release angler do with that knowledge?

Quammen, whose writings explore the givens of nature and the ambiguities of the human soul, answers slowly, almost tortuously, as if mirroring the hard journey he's traveled while thinking about this subject. "I've had more and more trouble with catch-and-release fishing as time goes on. I haven't stopped completely . . . and I haven't decided that one shouldn't fish," he adds quickly, making sure I understand that he's not about to offer any moral prescriptions. "But I've concluded that it's speciesist to tell ourselves that it's a game to the fish. It's deadly mortal serious to them. These animals were hysterically fighting for survival, and it didn't matter whether you had your barbs bent down"

He pauses. His black shirt, flowered tie, and long hair pulled back in a ponytail make him look like a rock musician or an eccentric physicist. This is a man who once criticized cougar hunting in print, then, several years later, at the invitation of a cougar hunter who wrote him about the flaws in his argument, accompanied the man and his dog through Montana's mountains. Eventually, Quammen ate a dinner of lion meat and wrote in another column, "Whatever arguments might be made against the hunting

of mountain lions, inedibility isn't one of them" He also wrote, "Nor would I argue for any absolute ethical distinction between the killing of a mountain lion and the killing of a trout"

As a slogan, "catch and release" was first used in the early 1960s by Richard Stroud, the head of the Sport Fishing Institute, an organization funded by fishing-tackle manufacturers. It almost immediately replaced what fish and game departments had been calling "fishing for fun," a phrase coined in the late 1950s by Albert Hazzard, the assistant executive director of the Pennsylvania Fish Commission, for a program of catching trout and putting them back in Clinton County's Old Woman's Creek. As Stroud recalls, "I gave a speech in which I said, 'I don't like the term "fish for fun." All fishing is fun. So I'll use the term "catch and release."'"

If inventing a byword insures immortality, Stroud's future is secure. In terms of societal recognition, "catch and release" is right up there with "thermos" and "Scotch tape." What "catch and release" doesn't address, of course, is "incidental kill"-the 5 to 10 percent of the trout that die from stress no matter how carefully they're handled. Warm-water fish, such as bass, suffer ever-higher rates of incidental kill. Least addressed in both the popular and professional literature is whether fish-caught and killed fish or caught and released fish-feel pain during the process. Which is Michael K. Stoskopf's whole point.

Stoskopf's easiness belies the enormity of his message. He is a department head at the College of Veterinary Medicine at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. Today, he has flown across the country to speak at the annual meeting of the Colorado Wildlife Society in Fort Collins. Stoskopf's late-in-the-day presentation

is a summary of a paper he authored called "Pain and Analgesia in Birds, Reptiles, Amphibians, and Fish." Of the 14,406 references to fish that he surveyed in the literature, only twenty-four matched fish and pain; of those, nineteen were about pain in humans caused by diseases contracted from fish. Of the remaining five references, none discussed the fact that fish might actually feel pain. Stoskopf concluded that the scientific community, like the public, has a serious misconception.

"Pain and pain perception in nonmammalian species must be unimportant," he says, "or at least so intrinsically different from the process in mammals that we need not apply our basic knowledge of mammalian nociception to birds, reptiles, amphibians, or fishes." But when Stoskopf applied basic knowledge of mammalian nociception-the ability to react to painful or injurious stimuli-to nonmammals, he found that they exhibited the four basic responses that mammals do: rapid startle reactions; simple nonspecific flight; vocalization; and "coordinated reaction," a bit of jargon meaning that the test individual bites the source of pain.

As for fish, they not only exhibited "pronounced reactions to contact with irritants or acute stimuli, including strong muscular and behavioral avoidance" (what makes our fishing reels sing their arias when we haul a fish toward shore), but they also showed unfamiliar responses such as color changes and subtle alterations in posture and in the habitats that they chose. The biochemical evidence for pain perception in fishes was also hard to discount: The nervous systems of teleosts (bony clude trout and salmon) produced compounds related to those that mammals produce when subjected to pain.

Turning off his slide projector,

Stoskopf smiles at the glum audience. "As you might suspect," he says, "these findings have profound implications for the fishing community, especially the catch-and-release segment of that community, which bills its sport as qualitatively different and somehow less injurious than hunting." Though his words make him seem antifishing, he isn't. "The danger," he explains, "is being in denial about what you're doing and then finding yourself in an indefensible position."

"It's also not bad to have fun," he adds with a grin, "because a lot of the economy's power to implement important habitat benefits comes from people enjoying themselves. That may mean inflicting pain in a variety of ways to individuals. It benefits the species, and it's certainly different from being cruel."

When told of Stoskopf's data, people like Ted Williams go ballistic. "I don't believe it," he says, voice rising. The conservation editor for *Fly Rod and Reel* and a take-on-anyone columnist for *Audubon*, Williams regularly infuriates both the left and the right. Trying to keep his tone level, he says, "I've caught bluegills off their nests four and five times within an hour. If it hurt them that bad they wouldn't be behaving this way." Williams is tired and disgusted with this entire discussion. "Needless guilt and contemplating our navels," he calls it. Then he says, "It's as simple as this. I'm a person, it's a fish. A friend likened catch-and-release fishing to lassoing a white-tailed deer and hauling it in until it's exhausted. But it's not analogous. If we're going to believe that, we should apply further. We shouldn't be putting DEET on our skin because it disrupts the feeding activity of mosquitoes."

"But the deer analogy is about deriving pleasure from another's pain, while putting DEET on is to stop

someone from hurting us," I reply. Long pause. "I guess so," he says, searching for another comparison. "It's like the Puritan sex ethic. Sex is only good if you don't enjoy it."

Before I mention that enjoyable sex is usually between consenting partners, Williams lets fly with catch and release's broadside. Citing the story of the threatened greenback cutthroat trout living in Rocky Mountain National Park, he turns our discussion to the issue of species and habitat preservation. The greenback cutthroat trout was originally listed as "endangered," but its recovery program "went nowhere," he says, "because no one could fish for it." Downlisting the trout to "threatened" and allowing catch-and-release fishing for it created a constituency. Money poured in and greenbacks increased.

This story has now become a classic and powerful ecological justification for catch-and-release fishing. It also doesn't stand by itself. After catch-and-release regulations were instituted on Yellowstone Lake and its feeder streams in 1973, cutthroat trout numbers increased as much as fourteen times in some of the creeks, creating profound ripple effects. In 1975, grizzly bears fished for cutthroats in 19 percent of the lake's feeder streams; by 1980, the bears were using 61 percent of the streams, an increase that John Varley, director of the Yellowstone Center for Resources and a man whom Williams likes to quote, attributes directly to catch-and-release regulations. Later, when I talked with Varley at park headquarters in Mammoth Hot Springs, he said, "If eagles and ospreys and grizzly bears and otters were going to vote on catch and release as opposed to catch and kill, we would get unanimous support for the former."

"We need to be saving habitat," Williams repeats, echoing Varley, "not worrying whether the cutthroat likes

being pulled in and released." Having fired his big guns on the habitat issue, Williams now makes a conciliatory gesture. "The people who say we need to kill fish and eat them, they are absolutely right, absolutely. When I was on the Thorne River, one of America's ten most endangered, by the way, because of logging, I was walking along the stream bank one morning. I heard what I thought was a rattlesnake. It was a coastal cutthroat jumping in the air and shaking its fins. Feeding on pink salmon fry. Hot fish right out of the cold Pacific. The first one I caught jumped five times and broke me off. And all we had brought for breakfast were sticky buns, and by God it was pretty nice to kill a couple of those cutthroats and fry them in butter and eat them. If we hadn't done that, that fishing experience wouldn't have been as powerful for us. And we released about fifteen that we didn't kill."

His voice becomes reflective. He's getting to the denouement, what really counts for him. "The reason I've stayed with catch and release is-it's not the fight. It's seeing the fish come up, sip the fly. Just to see that. It's pretty neat. Being in Yellowstone is being part of the ecosystem, watching the flies dimple the water, looking at the sky. I don't go to fight them. I go to join them."

If that's it-just wanting to be part of things as Williams and the rest of us have claimed-why not clip off the bend of the hook and simply cast the harmless fly?

John Betts, the renowned fly tier and angling scholar, not only thought of the question before I did, he thought of the answer. Disturbed by the small but inevitable percentage of trout injured while being released, Betts began to fish with flies from which the hook bends had been cut. Trout would rise to these hookless flies three, four, even half a dozen times. Damage to the fish

was zero, but Betts was disappointed. “Missing was the adrenaline surge that came from the anticipation, take, and initial runs and jumps,” he wrote in *American Angler*, a journal devoted to flyfishing and fly-tying.

Still needing some connection with the fish, albeit brief, Betts started to tie “tag” hooks, standing for “touch and go.” They have a ringed eye at both ends. The business end can’t penetrate the fish’s mouth but will hold the fish long enough for the angler to feel it on the end of his or her line, see it jump, maybe even get a run or two out of it. “My need to touch whatever I’ve caught,” Betts reflected, “originated in lessons learned millions of years ago for reasons other than sport. Touching is one of the last vestiges of our past and may now seem our only way to keep in contact with it. It also provides a sense of validity for ourselves at the moment and later, when we tell others about what we’ve done. My need to touch is now tempered by the realization that resources are limited and that what I touch is becomingly increasingly scarce.”

Betts’s little essay generated a loud response. Half of the letters to the editor offered a variation on “Kudos for this courageous article.” Half said, “Let me puke.” Most people entirely missed Betts’s point about how catch-and-release fishing is being used to provide angling in a time when most places have quite literally run out of fish.

Not far from where Betts fishes on Colorado’s South Platte River, another angler, Bob Behnke, professor of fishery biology at Colorado State University, ponders many of the same questions, particularly the biblical one of transforming few fish into many to feed the hungry masses. His work and his popularization of others’ research has undermined two popular angling myths—namely, that barbless hooks are necessary for successful catch-and-

release fishing and that the single hook is less injurious than the treble hooks used on spinning lures. Behnke cites controlled studies in which mortality did not increase with barbed hooks or with treble ones. Such evidence infuriates the purists with their hats brims studded with expensive flies, their barbs bent down.

People in the animal-rights movement are also angry at Behnke, for he maintains that fish don’t experience the sort of pain that a human might experience with a hook in its mouth. “If it was an experience of extreme trauma, comparable to a human’s being taken to a hospital after a severe injury,” he says, “you would not likely do it again within a day. Yet you can catch the same fish every day by dangling a lure in front of it. Cutthroats are caught and released about ten times each season in the Yellowstone River within the park. They would learn not to be caught again if they were experiencing extreme pain.”

He does note that cutthroats are notoriously easy to catch as compared to brown trout, with rainbows ranked someplace between the two species. Do brown trout thus feel more pain than cutthroats do? Or are they just smarter?

Since fish can’t tell us about what they’re feeling, Behnke suggests that we have to make inferences about their pain thresholds from circumstantial evidence. Citing electroshock sampling methods, used across the nation by fishery biologists to gather information about trout populations, he says, “Those fish are hit again and again, several times in one year, with electric shock that makes them stiff as a board. We know that the shock causes hemorrhaging and fracturing of the vertebrate column. But as far as the trout’s continued survival and growth, there’s no indication that the shocking is damaging them. Some of

our most famous trout waters would never support the numbers of trout they do if electroshocking were really harming the fish.

“Or take tagging,” he goes on, “where numbered tags are inserted with wires right through the fish’s body with no evidence that it’s harming their survival, growth, or well-being. In fact, they carry these tags for years. Or here’s another example of the difference between fish and humans: In coastal waters, salmon are routinely attacked by sea lions; you see the fish swimming upstream with wounds that would be lethal to a person.”

But what about Stoskopf’s contention that fish feel pain because their physiological reactions to stress are similar to those of mammals? “Similarities don’t mean that they’re feeling the same kind of pain,” Behnke counters. Then, like Williams, he points out that whether individual fish actually feel what we know as pain is really not the issue we should be discussing. “Catch and release is a management tool. Without catch and release you wouldn’t be able to maintain quality fishing.”

Lee Wulff, indisputably one of the greatest fly anglers of this century, said the same thing more simply in 1939: “Game fish are too valuable to be caught only once.” From a biological, political, and economic standpoint such reasoning can’t be faulted. Catch and release maintains fish populations and pleases anglers. Anglers vote and they buy fishing licenses, helping to keep fish and game departments in business. They also buy tackle and clothing, stay in motels, eat in restaurants. There isn’t a chamber of commerce in the land that weighs a fish’s pain against its community’s annual revenues.

You have to seek out someone like Jack Turner to see the crack in this utilitarian armor. “We’re dealing

with a group of people,” he says, “fishermen, climbers, boaters, for whom fun and sport are more important than virtually anything else and who lack restraint. We could further limit access to the resource. Maybe have a lottery like in the Grand Canyon. Raise the cost of licenses. We don’t have to give everyone unlimited fishing opportunities. Maybe this is something that can’t be done everywhere. But it could be done in Yellowstone and Grand Teton parks, which already prohibit river running. Ultimately, people will have to restrict their use of nature.”

When I point out to Turner that this would turn America into Europe, where only the wealthy get to fish for trout (and where trout are killed and eaten), he sighs. His calling is principles, not politics.

The rivers clear, the summer warms and turns to fall. I digest not trout but ideas about trout. Like everything else in nature, these beautiful fish, their backs like fields of wildflowers, stand not for themselves but as an interface between humans and the primal world.

Not a single one of us has to catch a trout to eat. Nor, for that matter, do those of us who hunt big animals like moose or elk and feed our families for a year have to kill them to survive. We’re making choices—more spiritual than economic—about grounding our souls in landscape through participation, about becoming participatory citizens of a home place through the eating of what that landscape produces. The wading, the casting, the stalking, the picking, the plowing, are the ceremonial means to procure nature’s Eucharist.

I wade up the Gros Ventre River, my home river, as it flows out of its canyon and debouches before the Tetons. Year after year, it continues to produce as many whitefish as cutthroats, but this evening, the sun

slanting onto the canyon walls, the water a deep malachite green, I hook neither. Still, I’m out again, trying to resolve my feelings about angling.

I wade upstream, between the silver flumes, hearing the rush of the water and immersed in spray, and loving the feel of the line—its tumescent load and spring, load and spring—as I cast. Everyone who talks about the catching of fish being secondary is right: simply being in the river is sensuous enough.

Almost enough.

If it were just the casting, the noise of the falling water, and the slanted evening light, there would be no reason to put a fly on the end of the line. We could just wade and cast. Few do. Most of us want a connection to the wild heart of the river, even if it is no more tenuous than seeing the fish come up to a hookless fly—the heart of the heart of the river made manifest in its most essential gesture: stalking and eating prey. After all, trout are essential in the way we cannot be. They live seamlessly within their homes, within their actions, and within their brains. They are not removed. Maybe catching them, even only hooking them, allows the angler to enter their pure state of being for a moment, the nonreflective alpha and omega of existence. It is what wellpracticed hunting and fishing are all about—focusing one’s attention until the awareness of attention disappears.

The beauty of catch-and-release fishing, in an age that has grown dubious about causing harm to other life-forms, is that it focuses that attention without dire consequences to the creatures toward whom that attention is directed (at least 90 percent of the time, when the species is a cold-water one like trout and the fish is released quickly, in the water).

When we consider that we’re products of a century that has spawned many

legal manifestations of justice to the unempowered—woman’s suffrage, citizenship for Indians, civil rights legislation, the Endangered Species Act, and global human rights—the action of releasing subdued fish resonates deeply in our psyches. Releasing what we have caught, we can then indulge ourselves in all the uplifting emotions of the kind steward’s noblesse oblige—the shackled is set free and, in freedom, gives life to other residents of the ecosystem; grizzly bears and eagles. In economic terms, this is a “trickle up” effect. What is good for the trout is also good for the environment, and, no small benefit, good for the angler’s soul since the actual death of the fish is perpetrated by another creature.

The tip of my line darts. I lift the rod in a gesture now practiced since I was a boy, and the weight of the fish is sudden, absolute, and amazingly sweet. The cutthroat splashes across the pool and rolls on the surface, the little reel singing like a diva. For half a minute, I just hold the trout because I’m using a two-pound-test tippet and the fish is nearly that big.

Finally, the fish tires and I pump it closer, letting the rod and the current do the work. After one more short run, I coax the fish close and bring my hand under its belly. Tucking the rod under my arm, I slide my hand down the leader and pause. After a whole year of thinking about these fish and talking to people who think about these fish (who actually think about these fish more than they do about a massacre in Rwanda or Bosnia), I should bop it on the head and take it home to eat. I should because I believe to the bottom of my soul that taking responsibility for some of the deaths we cause by our eating is one of the key elements of right living.

But I flick the hook out of the corner of its mouth (despite Behnke’s evidence, I bent down the barb) and

let it swim away. I don't want to keep it. Nor am I comfortable with letting it go. I head toward the shore, thinking, admitting that, in the end, we angle because we like the fight—otherwise all of us would be using hookless hooks. Not one angler in ten thousand does. The hook allows us to control and exert power over fish, over one of the most beautiful and seductive forms of nature, and then, because we're nice to the fish, releasing them “unharméd,” we can receive both psychic dispensation and blessing. Needless to say, if you think about this relationship carefully, it's not a comforting one, for it is a game of dominance followed by cathartic pardons, which, as a nonfishing friend remarked, “is one of the hallmarks of an abusive relationship.”

Hooking the fly into the line keep, I step onto the rocky bank. No one likes to hear his friends make those allusions about his fishing, especially when they have the slight ring of truth and especially after one has spent most of his life catch-and-release fishing. Hiking up the bank, my old waders leaking water, I wish I could lay it all to rest as easily as one of my neighbors, Yvon Chouinard, does. “You know fish feel some pain,” said the old mountaineer turned master angler when I raised the issue with him, “because when you set the hook they explode. But they keep on striking,” he explained, “so I think it's no big deal.”

His voice gaining the slightest edge of discomfort, he added, “Shit. . . causing pain. If you want to know about pain, go run a marathon. Not all pain is negative. Not that these fish seek out pain, but it's not bugging them.” It's as good an answer as any, if you can really believe it.