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More-than-human encounters with fish in the City: from careful angling practice to deadly indifference

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ABSTRACT

Angling is an immensely significant leisure practice that provides an important window onto the variable and selective ways humans value animals, and on how humans and animals variously affect each other's lives. Through a novel ethnography of coarse angling practice, this paper focuses on the simultaneity of coarse fish as victims of human play and as biosocial actors with considerable affective power above and below water. We posit that paying close attention to the embodied and performative contexts of catching and caring for fish for leisure reveals deeply rooted passions and paradoxes that raise questions not only about angling but about the stark injustices within the spectrum of human-fish encounters. We conclude by asking whether angling should be consigned to history or whether anglers are important socio-ecological practitioners that could and should do more to challenge the cruelties and injustices within human-fish relations.

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Introduction

Fish, like other cold-blooded creatures, are largely unrecognised as significant social actors or accorded similar levels of sentience and ethical consideration as warm-blooded animals in the academy and in wider society (Atchison, 2019; Brown, 2015; Markwell, 2019). The social science literature on human-animal relations has, however, begun to recognise angling as an important leisure practice in its own right, as well as an activity that offers a window onto the variable and selective ways humans value fish and other animals more generally (see Bull, 2011; Danby et al., 2019; Franklin, 2001; Markuksela & Valtonen, 2019). Nonetheless, empirical studies of angling practice remain rare. We address that absence through a unique ethnography of the most popular form of freshwater angling in the UK, coarse angling for non-salmonids (Bear & Eden, 2011) in which one of the authors joined a coarse angling club at a lake in Leazes Park in central Newcastle-upon-Tyne, North-East England. Although located at a single venue, the ethnography uncovered how coarse angling practice is a many-sided activity that can reveal much about the contextual and ethical ambiguities within and across the spectrum of human-fish relations.

A significant focus of this paper is on the simultaneity of sport fish as victims of human play and as biosocial actors with considerable affective power above and below the water's surface. Not only do physical and physiological boundaries between air and water determine the nature of the engagement between angler and fish, deep impulses and emotions shape its content and form (Atchison, 2019). For example, anglers care for fish with a passion (Preston-Whyte, 2008; Mordue & Wilson, 2018; Yates et al., 1993), and through such things as angling codes, waterscape

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management, stocking policies, and so on, make great efforts to ensure optimum fish welfare within angling's sporting boundaries. The 'passion for angling' (Yates et al., 1993), however, has a dark side in that its aim is to trick fish into taking a hooked bait or lure in order to pull them from the water into the airy world of humans (Paxman, 1995; Mordue and Wilson, 2018; Washabaugh & Washabaugh, 2020). Even though coarse anglers return their catch alive, the act of catching fish is unavoidably antithetical to the welfare of those individuals who are caught (Washabaugh & Washabaugh, 2020). We explore this care/cruelty paradox in some depth by examining how anglers intervene in the lifeworlds of fish and how fish in turn affect anglers in deeply 'entangled' ways (cf. Greenhough, 2011; Haraway, 2008). Though we proffer no a priori moral position on angling, we do explore how anglers reconcile any suffering they might inflict on fish within the totality of what, for them, coarse angling is all about. From here we consider the social and political value of angling and question whether catching fish purely for leisure and pleasure is an unnecessary corruption that should be consigned to the mores of the past.

More-than-human aspects and issues in angler-fish encounters

Our conceptual approach draws on aspects of more-than-human scholarship, which itself is strongly influenced by the posthumanism and generalised symmetry of actor network and non-representational theories in which humans and nonhumans are accorded equal amounts of agency, and where an actant's power is determined not by essential characteristics but by their position in networked assemblages of heterogeneous relations (Latour, 1997; Law, 2009; Thrift, 2008). From this baseline, more-than-human scholarship seeks to attend to the vitalities, spatialities and agencies of nonhumans and their abilities to constitute the world(s) of humans (Buller, 2014, 2015). Which is not to suggest a strict genealogy or uniformity, indeed more-than-human research is highly diverse, even though it is dominated by an empirical focus on terrestrial animals (Gibbs, 2020). Our focus on fish bucks this trend, and is set within the prism of species relations of power as they are mediated by uneven human-animal dynamics (cf. Hovorka, 2019). Thus, while we acknowledge animal agency, 'we must acknowledge human power and control in shaping animal positionality within animal networks and hierarchies' (Hovorka, 2019, p. 750). In this, ethics and politics go hand in hand, and not only are different animal species affected differently within and across varied human-animal assemblages, individual animals within the same species can experience different subject positions depending on their charismas and affective powers to influence humans. Coarse angling is one such assemblage, made up of heterogeneous associations between humans, animals, technologies, places and a host of other 'material semiotics' (Law, 2009). Crucially, while it is designated and structured by humans, it is wholly dependent on live, charismatic, fish presence at and in the water, just as it is dependent on social acceptances from the relational spaces in the human world above.

The paradoxical nature of catching fish on the one hand and caring for them on the other in angling draws us to Puig de la Bellacasa's (2017) work on how humans are always involved in care in our day-to-day relationships with non-humans. Quotidian care, she argues, tends to be speculative and situated, but transformative for that; and she challenges normative expositions of care as rather grandiose, essentialist treatises trapped by moralist blueprints that do not sufficiently recognise the impurities and affectivities of actual routine caring. This nuanced and practical, though challenging, orientation is compelling for this study because it suspends the blanket moralism underpinning positions such as those of animal liberationists (cf. Singer, 1990) that simply accuse anglers of wanton cruelty when their behaviour is far more complex than this (see, for example, Arlinghaus et al., 2009; Mordue and Wilson, 2018; Washabaugh & Washabaugh, 2020). Moreover, fish occupy different subject positions within the angling pantheon, and offer a unique set of relational propositions compared to many other animals because they are cold-blooded, are made up of different species who live in a variety of subterranean water environments, and are somewhat alien to the airy world of humans (Bear & Eden, 2011; Brown, 2015; Atchison, 2019). Even in academic

scholarship fish ‘emerge as fluid, slippery, evasive, marginal, excessive, and multiple, as much as they also slip in and out of the edges of human practice’ (Atchison, 2019, p. 737). Anglers, on the other hand, directly engage with fish in intimate and deeply affective ways (Yates et al., 1993), which are not simply about emotional sentiment or lust for the hunt, but are about deep connections realised in the ‘*forces of encounter*’ and borne in human-animal ‘*in-betweenness*’ (Mordue, 2009; Preston-Whyte, 2008; Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 2; emphasis in original). Crucially, these forces are not concocted in the mind but are sensed before becoming conscious, passing between people, objects and other non-humans to create a mutually constituted forcefield of affects. Affect is thus a precognitive contagion (Gibbs, 2008) that registers in the body and flows through space to drive an assemblage into motion, thereby energising its own reproduction as it goes (Thrift, 2008; Wetherall, 2012).

A significant criticism of more-than-human studies, however, is that issues of power and control in human-animal relations have been somewhat neglected, especially in comparison to preoccupations with conceptual, theoretical, and disciplinary developments (see, Kopnina, 2017; Arcari et al., 2021; Lorimer, 2012). Kopnina (2017, p. 349), for example, argues that more-than-human multi-species ethnographies are ‘too academic to be truly political’, and Arcari et al. (2021) make the charge that focusing solely on local level human-animal entanglements fails to make a real difference to animal welfare because the research is too politically and economically disengaged and too selective in its concern for certain animals while ‘off-staging’ others. An academic orientation, they contend, which serves to flatten the structural reasons why billions of animals are slaughtered and cruelly mistreated each year on a global scale. Though we think such arguments are somewhat overstated, we are acutely aware of the overriding importance of the very real political issues to which they refer. At the same time, we agree with Srinivasan (2016, p. 76) who says animal vulnerability is so ‘often tied to their place(s) in human society’ and with Gibbs (2020) who points out that this spatiality indicates the need for more political awareness in animal geographies and other more-than-human scholarships that connects research on local entanglements to global issues of animal welfare. In our concluding discussion, we thus include a reflection on whether the knowledge gained from this research can potentially help make a material difference to the lives of fish beyond our local case study, and indeed beyond angling.

Angling as a deeply embodied field of encounter

As in all anglings, to be proficient a coarse angler needs to amass detailed knowledge of their target species, the ecologies that sustain them, and the technologies used to enter their world and catch them. By bringing such knowledge together in repeated angling practice both anglers and fish go through a series of alterities and becomings. For instance, anglers endeavour ‘to think like a fish’ in order to ‘become-fish’ so that their underwater presence is as natural and imperceptible as possible (Bear & Eden, 2011, p. 340; cf. Deleuze & Guattari, 2005). In so far as anglers succeed in this – which of course is not physiologically possible – it is not so much through skilful mastery of fish but through ‘affective contagion’ (Bear & Eden, 2011, p. 340) and deterritorialisation in a watery ‘zone of proximity’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 2005, p. 275). According to Markuksela and Valtonen (2019, p. 4), a dance ensues in which ‘[a]ll the agents (anglers, fish and waterbody) are unpredictably and emergently transformed, and the agency performed during the dance is distributed among those who take part in fishing practice’. We would also add that such angling performativity is about ‘lives-in-the-making’ (Buller, 2014, p. 313), enacted through ‘*relational*’ bodies, ecological in form and ethological in apprehension’ (Anderson & Harrison, 2010, p. 7; emphasis in original). By which various capacities, dispositions and affordances, inherited from human and non-human predecessors, environmental pasts and presents, spill from the worlds of fish into the worlds of anglers, and visa-versa (cf. Anderson & Harrison, 2010; Buller, 2014; Ingold, 2000). Though angling practices can vary in different places, boundaries between angling codes anywhere can be blurred and are often a matter of local variation and nuance concerning relations between dominant social

structures, angling cultures, resident species, location, and indigenous natures (cf. Bull, 2011). Angling's popularity is thus situated and global, with Cooke et al. (2017) estimating there are no less than 220 million recreational anglers worldwide, many of whom embrace the variety the sport affords in all types of water, saline and fresh. Angling has also become a form of international tourism that offers an expanding choice of freshwater and marine destinations, and fish species, across the globe (Bull, 2011; Mordue, 2013). And as fishing for subsistence has become angling leisure so too has the subjective status of fish been transformed from meat to game, to trophy, adversary, entertainer, victim, symbol, spirit guide, companion, and so on. Likewise, fishers have become anglers, pleasure seeking predators, guides, cultural ambassadors, icons, environmental stewards, and piscatorial nomads.

Even though the majority of coarse angling is for pleasure and not competition, like other types of pleasure angling, it is a 'serious leisure' (Stebbins, 2007) which is about multi-layered learning motivated by many co-existing, and often contradictory, biosocial drivers (Frawley, 2015). Furthermore, to enter the angling assemblage is to be part of the production of 'a new body-world' (Gibson-Graham and Roelvik, 2013) residing simultaneously in and at the water and the relational spaces of society beyond. As Bull (2011, p. 2270) puts it, angling 'weaves its way through the spaces of encounter' from the waterscapes where angling happens to spaces, such as pubs, cafes, meeting rooms and houses where angling is discussed, read about, studied, organised, administered, and prepared for. Thus, in a Heideggerian sense, angling is both about being in or at specific angling locations and about involvement in and amidst the wider angling world of heterogeneous relations (cf. Dreyfus, 1993; Frawley, 2015; Mordue, 2009, 2013). The crucible of angling, however, is always the water where anglers and fish physically meet. And though embodied phronesis garnered at each angling venue is existential and personal, it can also be shared and translated with others, either at the venue in real time or through the telegraphs of the angling network (cf. Bull, 2011; Mordue, 2009, 2013) – which is a complex of relations we aimed to gain some access to in our research.

Methodology

The ethnography started when Sharon joined Leazes Park Angling Association (LPAA) in Newcastle upon Tyne between the autumn of 2016 and autumn 2018, which has exclusive rights to fish the Park's 1.65 acre lake. At the time of her joining, the LPAA had a membership of 150, of which 120 were able-bodied men (reflecting how angling is male dominated more broadly), and 30 were classified as disabled, of which 18 were males and 12 females. This meant that Sharon became the only able-bodied female member of the club, and as a complete novice angler was taught to fish in six structured sessions by some of the club's senior male members who were angling instructors certified by the Angling Trust (the governing body of angling in England).

Having a novice angler researcher join a coarse angling club as the linchpin of the ethnography indicates how the research was exploratory, even uncertain and speculative from its inception (cf. Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). Furthermore, it was conducted in the same relational spirit as Buller's (2015) espousal that multispecies ethnographies should be open-minded and seek to account for animal presence and agency in routine animal-human encounters, from which 'emergent knowing' (Buller, 2015, p. 378) would surface as the research unfolds. That said, we would not characterise this research as a multispecies ethnography in which the human is decentred in order to serve an anti-anthropocentric agenda in the data gathering process (see, for example, Danby et al., 2019; Daspher, 2020 on multispecies ethnographies in leisure research). The reason being that angling is fundamentally an anthropocentric practice with unequal power relations between humans and fish at its core, and accessing these 'impure' relations through hands-on participation was the *modus operandi* of the ethnography. Which is a positionality

consistent with Puig de la Bellacasa's (2017) orientation and that of Gillespie (2021, p. 10) who says:

we may not be ready [or able] to decentre the human in our methodological discussions because we have not reckoned yet with how implicated we are as a species in the lives and deaths of other animals. To decentre the human could involve obscuring those implications.

She goes on to say that '[t]o attend to our own place in a web of relationality with other animals is not necessarily to *centre* the human, but involves instead trying to understand our own human animality and its effects in relation to others' (Gillespie 2021: 11 italics in original). Which is consistent with a more-than-human attunement 'to the power of nonhuman subjects to shape the world and to the ways in which the human becomes through relations with other beings' (Ogden, Hall and Tanita, 2013: 16–17; in Daspher, 2020, p. 4). We also did not prefigure fish purely as victims of anglers but considered them animals with potentially significant agential power in the coarse angling assemblage (cf. Corman, 2017; Gibbs, 2020).

As an experienced angler, Tom made the case that the positionality and agency of fish in angling was under-explored, and that such an exploration would benefit from a disinterested researcher actually learning to *become* an angler with a fresh sensing and open curiosity on what would unfold. Given the focus on animal agency and exploration, Sharon felt relatively comfortable with the research, even though she was challenged by it, and volunteered to lead the ethnography despite being a vegetarian opposed to any harm towards animals. Tom, in the meantime, stayed away from the field so as not to influence Sharon's data collection and unfolding as an angler in any way. Sharon's was thus a personal journey of discovery and learning that would not have been available to Tom. His journey of discovery happened largely through Sharon's fieldwork, which he would access through reading her extensive field notes, from the photographs she took, the drawings she made, her personal reflections, and the research debriefings that punctuated the research process. Then, by bringing our observations together, we would come to an agreed understanding of the relational content of the angler-fish encounters witnessed at Leazes Park (cf. Buller, 2015).

It is also important to point out that we had no intention of trying to speak for the fish, because it was simply not possible to enter their world on anything like their terms (cf. Buller, 2015; Derrida, 2008). We were, however, very attentive to potential fish suffering, not least through the potential of Sharon actually catching a fish, though without intervening in the angling at Leazes Park Lake in any moralistic way, which could have compromised the whole ethnography. Haraway (2008) argues that when researching uncomfortable 'real world' situations within human-animal encounters ethical sensibilities can nonetheless operate and be cultivated, which is extemporised by 'response-able' research scientists and technologists who can and do care for, and sympathise with, animals within the bounds of their experimental work (also see Greenhough & Roe, 2019). We also thought it ethical and practical to be as transparent as possible with the Leazes Park anglers. Our research was therefore completely overt, with its purpose and Sharon's positionality as a researcher/vegetarian and animal lover declared to the angling club. Happily, not only was her membership welcomed, it was generally met with a certain curiosity and joyful anticipation by the anglers she encountered and got to know.

Once Sharon's training was over, she would visit the lake at least twice per month over the two-year period where she would continue to observe the anglers, converse with them, write field diaries, take photographs, and make drawings that would record her observations, personal experiences and reflections, and recall what anglers said and did. In all, Sharon made 32 research visits to the lake, totalling around 85 fieldwork hours. She did, however, stop her own angling once the training was completed because she felt too uncomfortable about the further prospect of hooking into a fish herself. On this, we both agreed that although the ethnography had a substantial introspective element, and we include some of Sharon's fieldnotes in the data analysis to reflect this, the greatest value of her presence and learning to fish was the embodied closeness it brought to the anglers and to the fish themselves. From here Sharon applied her focus on what experienced anglers said and

did, though now from the status of an insider with a natural presence in that community and angling space.

Coarse angling and coarse fish: a close and passionately mysterious affair

That coarse anglers develop an intimate relationship with their quarry fish, both as individuals and as a species, is illustrated in some sharp relief by the response of Leazes Park Lake anglers to the death of a celebrated specimen carp they named ‘Quasimodo’ - to the extent that binaries between humans and fish can become blurred. Quasimodo was estimated to be some 30-years-old when it died in 2016 of natural causes, it had a distinguishing hump on its back and had reputedly only ever been caught twice. Described frequently by several LPAA anglers as being ‘so clever’ (Sharon’s field notes) for how it outwitted so many attempts to catch it, its loss was collectively marked through a burial ceremony in Leazes Park’s Oriental Garden. During the ceremony older club members reflected on Quasimodo’s life and character, and shared memories of their personal encounters with it. When Sharon discussed this event with John, the LPAA Chairman, he rather poignantly evoked a ‘common sense of recognisable human/animal vitality, shared kinship and embodied finitude’ (Buller, 2014, p. 38) when he told her that ‘the gutted feeling the anglers had was also related to their own sense of time passing’.

As extraordinary an event the burial of Quasimodo was, it is not unique or particular to Leazes Park. Tilley and Cameron-Daum (2017), for example, found that coarse anglers at Squabmoor Lake in Devon also bury dead fish in a specially set out graveyard. Moreover, like the anglers in Bear and Eden’s (2011) study, and those at Leazes Park Lake, Squabmoor Lake anglers bestow prominent fish with monikers and character assessments; and, if a particular well-known fish had not been caught for three or four years it would go on a missing list (Tilley & Cameron-Daum, 2017). Such ceremony and personalisation demonstrate that angling is never realised through the finality of the catch. Indeed, anglers engage a kind of alchemy of discovery and assimilation. As they venture from their airy world to commune with the other body-world of fish, it may be a repeated trip to the same place where anthropomorphic tropes guide the way, but each occasion is an event unto itself in which the angler ventures deep into the mysteries within.

In a review of Yates et al.’s. (1993) seminal book, *A Passion for Angling*, the writer muses on this ‘very essence of fishing’ as being something magical and ephemeral ‘but real and vibrant nonetheless’ (<http://www.amazon.co.uk/2011> in Mordue & Wilson, 2018). In Merleau-Ponty terms this is about the pursuit of other worldly beings as ‘*associated bodies*. . . , others who haunt me and whom I haunt; the “others” along *with* whom I haunt a single, present, and actual Being as no animal ever haunted those beings of his own species, locale, or habitat’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 161 emphasis in original). So angling is a multispecies haunting where water is the ‘flesh’ (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1964) in which fish and angler become entangled others (also see Bull, 2011). Though actually becoming-fish is never humanly possible, it is the conjugation of coarse angler-fish difference in the waterbody where such becoming becomes real. While ‘the catch’ is a pinnacle moment, it does not complete or solve the mystery, neither would killing the fish, because angling is not about completing or solving, it is in the haunting where its ‘magic’ and ‘the metaphysical aspects of angling’ lie (Bull, 2011, p. 2271).

Furthermore, the more challenging a fish is to catch the more deeply felt the satisfaction of the angler is. And carp as a species are especially revered by coarse anglers for their mysteriousness and superior fishy intelligence. Yates et al. (1993) even go so far as to argue that carp are superior to all freshwater fish, including the so-called ‘king of fish’, the salmon. And in a deliberately absurd anthropomorphic showdown between these game and coarse ‘champions’ say:

If you choose strength alone, there’s not much to choose between a salmon and a carp, but in animal intelligence the difference is vast . . . Taking on a big wild carp is like challenging a chess grand master. The salmon, on the other hand, is certainly a game fish but, like a video game, it will only play if it is switched on,

and if the water is not right you may as well go home.

(page 79)

Positioning carp as super fish in this way is not a British predilection either. In Australia, for example, anglers also laud the intelligence of carp over that of other freshwater fish species, often referring to them as ‘spooky fish’, which is a designation that ‘broadens the sense of agency carp have . . . between many fish and the fisher’ (Atchison, 2019, p. 740). With this, there is a certain affective atmosphere (cf. Thrift, 2008) when carp are present in a fishery, which Trevor at Leazes Park Lake evoked when he said: ‘carp are fantastic fish, unlike perch and roach they are not daft. The challenge is tricking them. So, if you can trick them, it is a real feeling of achievement’. Trevor’s biggest catch was a 26lb carp which, on each of the three separate occasions he had caught it, made him feel ‘over the moon’. He also came to realise that the fish seemed to learn from its experience, saying: ‘the big twenty-six pounder has been caught before, so it relaxes into it’. Thus, as fish anticipate and adapt to anglers’ practices, and vice versa, ‘the airy world above water becomes part of the living space of fish, so that spatial dichotomy of familiar and alien appears increasingly redundant’ (Bear & Eden, 2011, p. 353).

At Leazes Park Lake it is sacrosanct that all captured fish are handled with care in accordance with strict ‘catch-and-release’ protocols:

We are strict with hooks and use the barbless ones. The knack is to not let the fish pull against the rod and line for too long. We also use knotless material for the net as not to scrape the fish’s scales off, and then we lift it gently down into what we call a cradle, which is a bed that the fish lies in whilst we sort it out.

(Simon, LPAA angler)

The rules also pay attention to the physiology and nature of particular coarse fish species, pointing out, for example, that predatory coarse fish such as zander and pike are not allowed in the lake and that perch have delicate lips so members are advised to ‘play’ them gently and return them to the water quickly. According to Mark, ‘if you play any type of fish skilfully and thoughtfully they can be brought in more easily, which is less stressful for the fish’. Other stress reducing techniques include the use of a disgorging tool for removing the hook quickly and gently, and when Sharon was training with other novice anglers the coaches would not allow any of them to unhook fish by themselves until they had become suitably proficient.

It is important to note that catch-and-release is practiced at Leazes Park Lake not so much because of policed authority but because LPAA members subscribe to it as good angling practice. Derek, for example, said: ‘there’s nothing greater than the joy of putting the fish back unharmed’. And Mark was keen to point out that while ethical care of fish is important in itself, it is tied to the interests of the anglers: ‘They often get put back in better condition than they were found. We don’t want them to die either – they cost money’. John (LPAA Chairman) also made the point that:

Angling is about looking after fish as well as hooking them. If fish are underweight for their age, catching them allows an assessment of their health. Also, if fish are skewered by herons or have battled with each other in the breeding season, causing injury, then cleaning cuts and infections saves lives.

While such nursing of fish may be physiologically effective as well as affective in terms of administering extra care and compensation in return for catching them, another affective act, kissing fish at the time of their capture and release, takes things further. Sharon witnessed this for the first time when spending time with Derek. Derek caught what he described as a ‘beautiful tench’, and once it was brought to the surface, he stroked it and said lovingly: ‘Look at its little teddy bear eyes!’. Sharon then noted how

Two other anglers gathered round, cooing as if it were a newly born baby. Just before release, and stroking the side of its body while admiring the tench’s vividly coloured scales, Derek kissed the fish on its side, and staring at it for as long as he dared, he then gently lowered it back into the water, and smiled as it swished between his hands and swam off.

Touch is fundamental to care of nonhuman life because it is immersive, thereby cutting through the abstractions of purely visual engagement (Puig dela Bellacasa, 2017), and the ‘catch-kiss-and-release’ adds a certain loving dramaturgy to the encounter that is now a ritual widely practiced in angling across the globe. Indeed, it is promoted on TV and other media as an expression of sustainable angling by celebrity anglers (see Frawley, 2015). However, the kiss and release contain numerous domination/love, care/guilt contradictions that cannot be untangled from the cruelty of the catch itself (cf. Washabaugh & Washabaugh, 2020). Which seemed to be almost subconsciously acknowledged by one of Sharon’s angling coaches, Simon, when he reconciled that ‘for every fish caught, about 100 are fed because of the amount of ground-bait put into the lake to attract single fish to the hook’.

The pain and pleasure of catching fish – a scientific and a public issue

There is much debate both in angling and scientific circles about cruelty in the sport, not so much on whether angling is cruel but on how cruel angling is. Paxman (1995), a keen game angler, argues that in angling discourses this is wrapped in either a fish pain/human pleasure trade-off or in divided opinions on whether, or to what extent, fish experience pain and stress when caught. On the pain/pleasure trade-off, Paxman (1995, p. 473) says: ‘At some time or other all thoughtful anglers have wondered how can they justify inflicting pain for their own pleasure. That electrifying convulsion of the rod is a creature struggling for its life’. At the scientific end of the debate, Huntingford et al. (2006) argue that because of a lack of a neocortex in their brains fish are not able to register pain and suffering (also see Key, 2016). Biologists such as Sneddon et al. (2018) however argue that scientific studies prove that fish, like other vertebrates, are indeed capable of feeling pain and stress, and that there is now a large consensus in the scientific community accepting this (also see Arlinghaus et al., 2009, 2012; Jahbr, 2018; for discussion Rose, 2016; Seth, 2016). We may never know for sure in positivistic terms by how much fish feel pain and suffering due to angling. We can, however, be sure that angling is cruel to individual fish caught because they are literally dragged from their watery world into the airy world of humans where they cannot breath or swim. The scientific enquiries are anyway premised upon human norms (Mordue and Wilson, 2018; Atchison, 2019), which in themselves may be anthropomorphically inappropriate, even if unavoidable and well-meant (see Bryant, 2007). It is also clear that coarse anglers accept the unresolvable nature of the pain/pleasure issue, and, like Simon above, reconcile that each time a fish takes a hook it is a momentary individual sacrifice for the greater good of the fish population, and that catch-and-release anyway allows the fish to swim away to get on with its life.

For such reasons, catch-and-release is widely practiced internationally (see, for example, The Wild Trout Trust – wildtrout.org, 2021). This in spite of the long-influential ethical position of Luce (1959), a moral philosopher and game angler, who argues that anything other than anglers eating their catch renders angling as nothing more than cruel play, because pleasure alone cannot justify the unavoidable cruelty of catching fish with rod and line. Paxman (1995, p. 476) rather polemically describes catch-and-release as a policy of self-interest rather than an ethic, ‘which is built on the explicit premise that the creatures are there only to give pleasure to the angler. If fish *do* feel pain, it is a policy of allowing them to continue living in order that we inflict pain on them, again and again’ (emphasis in original). Therefore, from a traditional game angling perspective, converting trout and salmon to meat is the only acceptable outcome of violence against them (cf. Adams, 2015), even though game anglers primarily fish for pleasure. This would also mean that coarse angling is pointless, and the status of coarse fish is similarly denuded.

On the other hand, for UK coarse anglers killing fish is pointless, both for ethical and sporting reasons (Mordue & Wilson, 2018; Tilley & Cameron-Daum, 2017). In Germany and Switzerland though, the Lucian ethic holds strong and in the last two decades catch-and-release freshwater fishing of any sort has been banned altogether. This ruling is very much in line with the German *Animal Welfare Act* that states ‘no-one may cause an animal pain, suffering or harm without

good reason' (TierSchG – Tierschutzgesetz (gesetze-im-internet.de) 2021) – with 'good reason' meaning that angling is only justifiable as a means of personal food consumption. Both in Germany and Switzerland, however, there has been a significant reduction in the sustainable management of fish stocks, along with a consequent decline in fish welfare as many fish are unnecessarily killed by anglers who follow a regulation they do not necessarily agree with (Arlinghaus et al., 2009).

Conversely, not only do UK coarse anglers outlaw the killing of fish in their sport, they will go to significant lengths to stop others – human or non-human – from killing coarse fish, even if it seems natural for them to do so. At Leazes Park Lake, for example, LPAA members volunteer to bailiff the lake at all hours to prevent any fish killing or poaching. However, some members of the public, notably those of East European origin, view coarse fish as a valuable menu item and fair game to be taken for the table (Tilley & Cameron-Daum, 2017). John, the LPAA Chairman, discussed this issue with Sharon at some length, recalling that occasionally fishing wire would be found tied to park benches located by the lake overnight as evidence of 'East European moonlighters' attempting to catch fish illegally. Similarly, 'troublesome' non-human fishers are chased in order to conserve fish stocks. And Paul, a volunteer warden, told of an incident when fish were killed after a major attack by cormorants:

I nearly cried when I saw the cormorants grabbing fish that were too big for them to swallow. They would just fling the fish in mid-air, and it was game-over. If these birds are allowed to settle, eight of them could clear this lake of fish within six months.

Mick also recalled how another predator, a mink, once took up residence on the lake's central island, which of course was an unwanted presence in the fishery. Mick volunteered to 'humanely' trap the mink, which proved very elusive, and after two weeks he finally resorted to trimming back the foliage on the island to 'flush it out' and once caught it was relocated to countryside outside the city.

Both Paul's and Mick's accounts illustrate how humans occupy the top reaches of the human-animal angling hierarchy. Fish are second, with carp, particularly large carp, occupying the top spot, and fish are deemed in need of protection by humans from 'predator' animals (and their survival needs) that come further down that hierarchy. Lowest of all are fish bait, such as worms and maggots that are impaled and drowned on a hook, or eaten by fish as ground bait, in the service of catching and caring for the lake's fishy residents. In her fieldnotes, Sharon reflected on these asymmetries, notably on how maggots were pressed into service:

I had to handle the maggots and put them on the hook, and I flinched as I put the hook through a maggot's head and watched it wriggle before casting it into the water. I was challenged by this, and it seemed weirdly obscene to process a living creature this way only to catch a fish and then put it back. After a while, I got used to sending maggots to their doom but the malingering guilt never left me.

All this exemplifies how the angling assemblage is a complex of multispecies differences and inequalities in which 'charisma works to differentiate one animal social group from another according to human hierarchical rankings of nonhuman value, utility, and aesthetic' (Hovorka, 2019, p. 753) that becomes normalised in routine recreational angling practice.

Interventions undertaken in the name of care and conservation at Leazes Park Lake also often happen in full view of the public. And the LPAA has a policy of engaging with the public not only to foster good public relations and to promote the benefits of their anglers' presence in the park, but as part of their need to manage the park's socio-natural ecology.

We have to be aware of all sorts of issues. Like disease, for example, so we involve the environmental agency to monitor the water quality. But also we have the challenge of how people and wildlife are managed in the best interests of the fish.

(John, LPAA Chairman)

And Mick stressed that it is not just ‘natural predators that are a threat to the ecosystem’, the public can unknowingly create problems too:

While it’s a cheap family trip for people to buy bread and throw it in the lake for the ducks, the salt on the bread is bad for fish and birds. Some birds end up with shrunken ‘angel’ wings because of it. People though can be quite offended if you advise them to buy cheap bird seed instead.

Everyday education in situ, then, seems to be the best tactic for managing the non-angling human members of the park’s ecosystem. Beyond this, working with non-angling as well as angling-related voluntary, public and private organisations in and around Newcastle-upon-Tyne is fundamental to the club’s *raison d’être* and legitimacy (www.leazesangling.com/rules.php – accessed September 2018). In this regard, the LPAA works with Newcastle City Council’s Adult Social Care Services via the Angling Trust to provide free fishing for people with physical and/or mental disabilities. Through sponsorship from Sport England and the UK Environment Agency, the LPAA also hosts a series of annual family fishing days at the lake. LPAA coaches also run angling workshops at local schools with a focus on environmental care as well as promoting angling as a healthful and sustainable activity. They do something similar with the nearby Gateshead District Scouts Association, which is part of the largest youth organisation in the UK (see www.scouts.org.uk). Numerous other angling-related charitable events are also held at the lake, with demand for events high, and which are validated by a growing body of influential evidence in policy quarters that angling has significant physical and mental wellbeing benefits for participants across the child/adult age range (Brown et al., 2012; Djohari, 2009). Brown et al. (2012), for example, say that not only is angling a gateway activity for people to connect with nature in deeply healthful ways, it ‘contributes to public knowledge about freshwater and marine environments, both formally and informally’ (page 7). In Sharon’s fieldnotes she recounts how, for her, fishing had

Become, surprisingly, totally absorbing and meditative, yet demanding. I thought I could perhaps sit there and relax by the lake but watching the float in case a fish ‘bites’ demands a meditative, hypnotising presence in and at the lake that I did not expect. After a few hours of doing this I’d go home feeling calmed and connected, and happy for the experience – then I remember I’m a vegetarian!

Simply by being there and being accessible through angling, fish do care for humans in a quite profound and visceral way, and can prosper themselves because of the interdependencies involved, though, as we have seen, that prosperity is not without its trade-offs, contradictions and ethical impurities (cf. Puig de la Bellacassa, 2017).

The UK government has become so convinced of angling’s social, wellbeing and environmental benefits that in 2019 it launched a National Angling Strategy aimed at increasing participation rates (see, *New National Angling Strategy aims to get more people fishing* – GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)). With such official support, and public outreach live sport fish have further presence in society, which challenges widely held assumptions about what the ‘social’ is, where its boundaries lie, what it is made up of, and who a social actor is or should be (cf. Buller, 2015; Hovorka, 2019). Indeed, as angler-fish encounters spill from myriad waterscapes into spaces of the social they integrate with humans in ways more affectively distributed than hitherto seen or acknowledged (cf. Bull, 2011; Danby et al., 2019). Whether this be through government policies, third sector interventions, everyday pleasure angling, or the international tourism market, fish who are caught for leisure and recreation have become synanthropes with a certain indexicality, citizenship, and political presence beyond their victimhood and natural beingness.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have presented an ethnography that examines first-hand the simultaneities of coarse fish as victims of human play and as actors with affective power that reaches beyond angling leisure into wider realms of the social, even government policy on health and wellbeing. This

assembled presence is, however, striated by unequal power relations, ethical ambiguities and paradoxes in which the cruelty of the catch underscores a whole system of care for fish that can seem unnecessarily wanton when held to moral scrutiny by those not party to angling's popularity and affective contagion. Nonetheless, coarse fish as a collective can and do thrive because of the care anglers exercise in nurturing them and the spaces that sustain them, whether that be for sporting or compassionate reasons, or both. Indeed, through judiciously controlling and shaping the positionalities fish hold in the upper reaches of angling's animal networks and hierarchies (cf. Hovorka, 2019) anglers privilege living, relatively wild, fish in ways not attended to in everyday, wider society. By doing so anglers encounter fish as familiar, even loveable, subjects rather than alien, slippery, and wholly subterranean creatures (cf. Atchison, 2019; Bear & Eden, 2011; Brown, 2015). Angling is thus transformative for fish as well as anglers who are somewhat akin to Haraway's (2008, p. 140) ethical dog breeders she lauds as 'often solidly knowledgeable about science, technology and veterinary medicine, often self-educated, and often effective actors in technoculture and the flourishing of dogs/[fish] and their humans'.

The ethnography shows how this flourishing is lived, morally imperfect, and hierarchical not only between different species of animal but between different species of fish and between different individuals of the same species. Which supports the more-than-human orientation of Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) and other scholars, such as Gibbs (2020) who argue that quotidian issues of care are indeed impure, and are political issues intertwined at every level and scale. On this, it is important to acknowledge the concerns Kopnina (2017) and Arcari et al. (2021) raise about the need for research that targets the structural injustices of wholesale animal mistreatment and slaughter rather than focusing on localised intimacies of human-animal entanglements. That said, we do not see the political project in the same oppositional terms, terms which figure entanglement orientated human-animal research as politically neutered, almost by default. From our case study, for example, we might consider how anglers will kiss and care for fish as they gently place them back in the water after capture as we also consider how ironically axiomatic it is that many, if not most coarse anglers, will share the general public penchant for eating industrially caught and reared fish in waters far away from the towns and cities where they are consumed. Which is an example of the type of 'double standards' that so exercise Arcari et al. (2021) on which research, such as ours, can reveal something of the affectivities, compulsions and contexts that underpin the cultures of why some fish are cared for and others not – not least the 1 to 3 trillion wild fish hauled from the sea each year to end up as meat, fishmeal, dog food, cat food, or other fish by-products (Jahbr, 2018; also see Atchison, 2019, on the selective slaughter of carp in parts of Australia).

Our findings also signal that proselytising on the victimhood of fish – and by extension other animals – to the exclusion of their other presences and potentials is not only a diminution of their natural-qua-social value but a political mistake. As Corman (2017, p. 252) puts it on animal victimhood more generally, an '*including but beyond* suffering approach strongly resonates with other social justice movements that have long resisted both the homogenisation and the reductionism of various subjects to pure victims' (emphasis in original). Moreover, just as fish subjectivities extend way beyond any single framing, the subjectivities of humans who catch fish for recreation and leisure slip the noose of a wholly derogatory diminution of their intentions and behaviours as those only of aggressors bent on visiting cruelty upon innocent creatures. Cooke et al. (2017) tell us that the 220 million anglers across the globe do deliver healthy fish populations and environments both in saline and fresh water – which takes political and economic clout as well as an ethic of care. In England alone freshwater angling contributes £1.4 billion per annum to the economy (Environment Agency, 2018). Moreover, sea angling is worth between £1.5 and £2 billion pa to the UK economy annually (CEFAS, 2020), which is more than the total economic value of commercial sea fishing in UK waters, and sea anglers voluntarily return 80% of their catch live to the sea in the interests of sustainability (ibid; Monbiot, 2020).

Although angling may be morally questionable, for us its complexity of ethical, social, economic and ecological relationalities brings numerous benefits to fish and humans that would simply be lost

if it were outlawed – though in the UK the power of the angling communities plus the public and governmental support for angling make that a very remote possibility. We do, however, posit that anglers generally underuse their political and economic power, tending to limit it to their own assemblage interests in which fish are selectively protected in relation to their charismatic affects and sporting prowess. Other fish are rather indifferently left to the instrumentalities of apparently unconnected and distant fishing assemblages to be processed as meat and commodity – which denies inherent qualities, equalities, and agencies of all fish as beings with intrinsic value worthy of social justice. By connecting our research to how angling is implicated in this hugely important issue we have taken a contextual step towards greater ‘understanding of both interspecies interactions *and* human systems of inequality in and through leisure’ (Danby et al., 2019, p. 299 – emphasis in original). There is more related work to do of course, not least on how anglers are already highly effective environmental and political agents with scope to extend that power further and deeper into wider society, and in doing so bring many more fish with them, not just those they can physically reach and catch.

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