

Fish welfare: ensure well-being or reduce suffering?

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Twenty years ago, fish welfare was still a foreign concept because it was assumed that fishes do not feel pain. Then, pioneers in research and the **aquaculture** industry began to improve the animals' living conditions. Eventually, certification schemes and retailers began to adopt the idea. The welfare of farmed fishes has become almost a matter of course. However, the result is rather mediocre. All efforts so far have at best reduced the suffering of some farmed aquatic animals, but have not led to their well-being.

It is not due to a lack of will on the part of farmers who want to do better. It's simply because most of the species farmed today are not capable of experiencing welfare in captivity, even under improved conditions. The welfare potential of the 87 species that have so far been assessed in the fair-fish database is very low, with a few exceptions.

One of the problems of fish farming is the large number of more than 350 species involved, most of which are not fully understood in terms of their needs and behaviour. Land animal husbandry includes 20, at most 30 species, and none of them are predators. On the other hand, many farmed fish species are carnivorous, especially species that are in demand in Western markets. The industry will have ever greater problems meeting the increasing demands for good treatment of animals with such a wide variety of species.

Would it not be wiser to focus research and development on the few species that show promising animal welfare potential, such as African catfish and Nile tilapia, and perhaps two or three other species later on.

The diversity of supply at the counter and on the menu has always been ensured by **fisheries**. Restoring this role is another good reason to enforce sustainable fishing practices and manage fish stocks so that they can fully recover. While sustainable fishing has become popular over the last 25 years, animal welfare in fisheries was only of interest to some idealists until two international research projects were recently launched.

Talking about animal welfare in fisheries sounds like an oxymoron. Let's rather talk about the best possible reduction of suffering, which means that we look for fishing gear and methods that hold the fish captive for the shortest possible time, do the least harm possible, and allow each fish to be stunned and killed immediately or released back into the water in good condition.

In fisheries, we are confronted with a variety of fishing gear and methods, some of which are associated with long and/or enormous suffering and with little potential for reducing suffering through improvements. ***Would it not be wiser to focus research and development on those fishing gears and methods that show promising potential for little suffering, such as handlines, pole-and-line, short longlines, trolling, encircling nets,*** used by small-scale fisheries, which bring 60% of the world's catch to the plate and could deliver even more with less competition from industrial fisheries.

Please contact me if you are interested in participating in a stakeholder process to explore opportunities for real fish welfare in aquaculture and real reduction of suffering in fisheries?

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