



Ethical Fishkeeping

Ethics are defined as a set of principles of correct conduct or a theory or system of moral values. Applied to pets, this means that the pet owner will do all within his or her power to ensure that the pet leads a long and comfortable life.

One of the reasons that people keep pets is to have something to nurture and take care of. This is good for the pet owner, providing lower stress levels and many other health benefits. But the health of the animal is also important and ethically it should have its biological and psychological needs met.

Why ethics are important in fishkeeping

Many people are attracted to the fishkeeping hobby as they find the appearance of a well presented aquarium appealing, but a fish is not an ornament. When a fish is kept as a pet in a confined space such as a pond or aquarium, it is totally dependent on its owner to provide food and care. Although there are not yet any laws

specifically applying to fish welfare, morally the right thing to do is to provide as high a standard of care for the fish as possible. If it is not possible to provide an acceptable standard of care for the fish due to lack of space or funds, then steps should be taken to find a more suitable home for the fish.



A well presented aquarium
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What the law means for fishkeepers

Most of the current laws on animal welfare date back to 1911 and do little to protect fish. The Animal Welfare Bill which was published in October 2005 would make the dyeing of fish by injection illegal in this country, however the import of dyed fish will still be allowed. The giving of fish as prizes will not be made illegal nationwide, but some areas have banned the practice on council property. The new bill also states that the fishkeeper will be required 'to do all that is reasonable to ensure the welfare of their animals'.

While the law does little to protect fish, it would be unethical to provide the bare minimum for fish as stated by law.



Fish stuffed into bags in a Hong Kong market

What constitutes fish cruelty?

To help prevent cruelty to fish, it should first be established what constitutes cruelty. The law itself is somewhat open to interpretation as to what is legal and illegal. Ethically speaking, anything that can harm the fish in any way or cause its quality of life to be lowered can be construed as cruel.



Betta Splendens / Siamese Fighting Fish

Keeping the fish in an unsuitable environment, for example a traditional goldfish bowl, an aquarium that is too small, an aquarium with no filtration or without a heater should one be required or keeping small fish, usually bettas, in a vase with a plant or in a small jar is inhumane as these conditions are inadequate for fish. Failure to provide suitable housing for fish leads to problems with water quality.

Poor water quality is probably the biggest cause of death and disease for fish. While it is not always the fault of the fishkeeper, the water quality should be monitored regularly to ensure that it is at the very least at a satisfactory level for the fish. Ammonia and nitrite should not be present and nitrate should be kept as low as possible. The aquarium should be cycled before any fish are added and this should be done using an alternative source of ammonia. Using fish to cycle a tank exposes them to ammonia that could injure or potentially kill them.

The fishes' requirements of pH, temperature and hardness should be researched and the water should be adjusted accordingly if needed. If disease does occur even after taking precautions to prevent it, it should be identified and treated as soon as possible.



A bowl is an unsuitable home for a fish

Tankmates should also be taken into serious consideration. Keeping small fish with larger predatory fish would result in the smaller fish being eaten, and is therefore cruel. In creating a community tank, different fishes' needs should be thought through and compared, for example a cichlid needing water with a high pH level



should not be kept with a discus needing more acidic water. Insufficient companionship could result in major stress for some fish. If a fish would naturally live in a shoal, then keeping it alone could cause it to become ill or even die.

Discus require acidic water to thrive

Wild-caught fish versus captive bred fish

Some fishkeepers are strongly opposed to keeping fish that have been caught in the wild. It is a very complicated issue with many points for and against the import of wild fish.

Many fish will not breed in an aquarium or in breeding pools, so importing wild specimens is the only way for fishkeepers to own these fish. Therefore, importing wild fish gives the fishkeeper a far greater choice of fish. Without the import of wild fish, the aquatic hobby would not be what it is today.

It has also led to the discovery of new types of fish and their behaviour, and as a result breeders have had more success with fish that previously would not spawn in an aquarium.



Betta Splendens / Siamese Fighting Fish



A Fish Farm in the Far East

However, importing so many wild caught fish can have a negative impact on the environment. The red tailed shark, a popular aquarium fish, is now extinct in the wild and the fish are produced on farms in Thailand. The cause of this extinction is unclear; it may partly have been caused by the aquatic trade, but environmental factors like the construction of dams leading to partial destruction of the fishes' natural habitat should also be taken into account.

Fish can also suffer even if they have not been caught. Coral is popular amongst many marine fishkeepers, but natural coral reefs are rapidly disappearing. Coral reefs are home to several thousand types of fish and if these reefs are destroyed then the fish will become extinct.

A view that is popular in the aquarium trade is that the trade in wild fish is beneficial to the people indigenous to the fishes' place of origin. It provides them with work and encourages them to preserve the fishes' natural environment.

Ethically, taking an animal from its natural environment to keep as a pet is wrong, but by keeping and studying these fish, ichthyologists

could eventually be able to breed all fish in captivity. The source of tropical fish and other imported aquarium supplies should be considered thoroughly before making a purchase.



How can the fishkeeper help prevent cruelty?

There are many responsibilities involved with owning an aquarium and not all of them relate to the fishkeeper's own fish. Shops that stock dyed fish or have a large amount of unhealthy looking livestock should be avoided completely. If these shops are boycotted by enough fishkeepers then the aquatic trade could see a rise in standards of fish welfare.

Not all aquatic shop staff members are trained and therefore the fishkeeper should do their own in-depth research prior to buying a new fish and buy the correct equipment needed for ensuring the fish's welfare. Many books are available and the internet can provide more than enough information for the beginner, as well as more detailed information for the advanced fishkeeper.

Keeping fish is a great responsibility that needs understanding of the fishes' needs and hard work to maintain a clean aquarium with good water quality, but the result of all the hard work is a beautiful healthy fish and that is the greatest reward for any fishkeeper.

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