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(Essay)

CATCH AND RELEASE

Fishermen like the new rules

-- but what about the fish?

Lee Wulff was ahead of his time when he wrote that "a game fish is too valuable to be caught only once." The year was 1939, and trout streams near the big cities were in trouble. The pattern, in those days, was to catch all fish you could, kill all you caught, and call on the government to stock more. Hatcheries obliged by producing trout in vast numbers, but the quality of the fisheries did not recover.

Research eventually showed what was going on. When you pour tame trout into a wild stream, they seldom survive long enough to reproduce -- but while they last, they stress their smaller, stream-bred relatives. The effect can be to damage the population rather than restoring it.

Today, anglers release many fish, even when the law does not require it, and the resource has prospered. Furthermore, what's good for the river has turned out to be good for Main Street. Merchants, outfitters, realtors, and house-builders are all working overtime to serve the migrants pouring into my part of the trout belt. Elsewhere in the nation, the rust belt is rusting, inner cities are decaying, and even the malls are losing customers. It seems that real wild trout have more drawing power.

You will have noticed that Lee Wulff sold catch-&-release fishing with the word "valuable," and my language has also come from the marketplace, to this point. No apology. The market can be -- must be -- an ally of nature. It's a lesson that became clear to me back in the 1960s, during a hard-fought campaign to protect the native brook trout in Virginia's Rapidan River. We won with the help of a constituency built by what was called "fishing for fun," in those days -- no-kill rules.

If each trout and each human is part of an economic resource, however, each is also an individual, and the individuals have gone through something that I did not foresee, back in the 'sixties. Two events on the same day opened my eyes to the 'nineties.

The first jolt came when I landed a feeble rainbow with fungus on its sides and fresh scars on its mouth. Later on, I saw another fish that had been caught too often, and then one with a blind eye. My last trout of the day had a section of loose gill. Those fish were, to be sure, a minority in a healthy population.

Their habitat was a big, popular Montana spring creek -- the kind where every rising fish is soon covered by a dry fly or nymph.

The second eye-opener came that evening, as we fisherfolk pulled off our waders. One young man reported that he had averaged four trout per hour -- a decent score, he thought, but nothing special. He would have to land eight per hour for twelve and one-half hours in order to achieve his goal of a "hundred-trout day." He would release all his fish, of course. He had already released himself. His sport was immaculately conceived, free from guilt.

Mine was not. An older friend named Vincent Marinaro had put the remorse back into fishing years earlier -- on purpose. I was returning a brown trout to the Letort Spring Run, and we both saw the red stain left by my hook. "Fishing is a blood sport," Vince said.

Vince knew the sources. A long time ago, one of our ancestors learned to make a flint spearhead and stick it into the meatiest prey around. The fishhook took longer to perfect but, in the fifteenth century, a treatise on angling was spliced onto a hunting book, as if an afterthought.

The urge to fish starts, then, with one certainty: you and I evolved as hunter-gatherers. We have always lived by eating other forms of life, and always will. If you prefer, take the Bible as authority for your diet, instead of evolution. Or read the great myths, which provide clear and compelling guidance.

The "basic hunting myth is a kind of covenant between the

animal world and the human world," says Joseph Campbell in The Power of Myth. Hunter consumes hunted, but the relation is "one of reverence, of respect." You address your prey not as "it" but as "thou," an individual close to you. When you learn to do this, Campbell writes, "you can feel a change in your own psychology."

My mother must have seen the change in me when I was a child, because she said nothing as I cleaned my catch. It had seemed like a small sunfish, until its emotional content spilled into the white sink. I asked myself what young anglers always ask when they see the blood: Why did I do this?

"Angling implies the infliction of a small amount of pain, and death", writes Arthur A. Luce -- "but so does almost every meal we hungry mortals take." Because the consequences are an unavoidable part of getting food, fishing is not cruelty. On the other hand, Luce continues, "To hook trout and put them back into the water ... is to inflict pain, however small the amount, unnecessarily.... It is a mild form of cruelty, but it is cruelty; it involves the infliction of pain without the hunter's justification for doing so."

Dr. Luce was an angler who also happened to be a professor of moral philosophy, and these quotations come from his essay on "The Ethics of Angling." It forms the last chapter of his book Fishing and Thinking, recently reprinted in an American edition.¹

What Luce called "the hunter's justification" is eternal.

1.Editor: This is not intended to be a plug, but you should know that I wrote the foreword to the new edition.

Even today, many lakes do not need catch-and-release management, and neither do some streams -- little ones far from a road, for example. In such waters you can catch enough trout for dinner, serve them to your family, and count on your ancestor with the spear to beam down psychic rewards.

Since Luce's time, however, something very new has happened. Nature is in trouble in so many places that fishers and hunters now have to worry about entire ecosystems as well as individual prey animals. We often invest more time and money in wildlife habitat than we spend on actual hunting and fishing.

Fortunately, we have a good guide in our new task. Aldo Leopold was a wildlife manager by profession, and he summarized what he learned in A Sand County Almanac. The book's last chapter calls for a new "ethic dealing with man's relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it." This "land ethic" -- Leopold's short term -- deals with ecosystems, nature collectively. It does not replace the old hunter's ethic, which still guides individual humans in dealing with individual prey.

The land ethic restored a little spring creek near my home. It had been deep and narrow, once, with overhanging vegetation for shade. Then cattle broke down the banks, clogged the spawning riffles with silt, and made the stream wide and shallow, leaving little cover for trout. I'd like to report that the owners of the land noticed the damage and took steps to end it. In this case, however, the spring creek simply became more valuable for fishing than for grazing. The place changed hands and its new owners

fenced the banks to keep cattle off.

We fishermen then planted new vegetation to stop erosion and built stream improvements to narrow the channel. We also adopted no-kill rules in order to ensure a return on our investment of sweat and money. The return we had in mind, of course, was big, wild, free-rising trout.

Aldo Leopold would approve of the new land ethic, if he were around. Perhaps he would also let the catch-and-release rules pass as enlightened self-interest. I am not sure of that.

Arthur Luce, the philosopher, would probably not concede that the end (a healthier stream) justifies the means (hooking trout with no intention of eating them). Sounds like "fishing for fun," he might say -- reminding me that trout never share in the fun. Studies of catch-and-release fisheries elsewhere show a mortality rate of between one and ten percent. Economically speaking, a loss this small is negligible. Ethically speaking, there is no such thing as no-kill fishing.

Vince Marinaro and I talked often about the recovery of the little spring creek, but his plans for a visit came to a halt when he learned that passenger trains don't reach this valley anymore. He died before I could persuade him to board his first airplane.

I think that Vince would have agreed with catch-and-release management for this stream. He had worked out his own way of reconciling the new land ethic with the old hunter's ethic. Call it moderation. Call it self-restraint. In any case, it was a

personal thing, not a rule of law. Vince would keep trout in some streams, while in others he released them. In both cases, his stomach seemed to regulate the size of his catch. He just stopped when he had caught about as many fish as he and his wife might have eaten for dinner. Mind you, he was old when I got to know him well, and appetites become easier to control with age.

I remember Vince telling me about catching an old Letort-strain brown with fins as big as the wings of a butterfly. That fish went back to breed, but it remained an individual, not a score -- a "thou," not an "it." Vince had lived the myth.

The hunter's ethic calls for something that is intuitive, after all -- if you give it a chance. You can pay your respects to your catch by serving it to your family with asparagus and parsleyed potatoes and cold white wine. You can also get to know a trout well by holding it under water for a moment, facing the current, recovering. You can admire its condition, its scars, and the individual pattern of its spots. Notice the eye of your prey, too. As eyes go, this one is not expressive, but it sees well at short range, and it is looking at you.

Enclosed: 4 slides of trout before release, prominent eye