

About 875 words

Revised
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SCORING

Catch-&-release fishing
does not let you off the hook.

(Alternative title: CATCH & RELEASE -- no subtitle)

Lee Wulff was ahead of his time when he wrote, in 1939, that "a game fish is too valuable to be caught only once." Most anglers in those days killed every trout they could catch, then called on the government to stock more. The fishing got worse despite the hatcheries' best efforts. Research has since shown that tame fish can stress wild, stream-bred trout, doing more harm than good to the fishery.

Anglers today release much of their catch, and wild populations are thriving. What's more, high-quality fishing in my part of the trout belt has made the new economy more prosperous than the old, with guides, shops, realtors, and builders working overtime. Elsewhere in the nation, meanwhile, the rust belt is rusting, inner cities are in trouble, and even the malls are losing customers. The shop-till-you-drop crowd has discovered fly-fishing.

You will have noticed that Lee Wulff sold catch-&-release management 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. The value of the trout's pretty spotted skin has already helped us humans to save its streams.

If each fish and each angler is part of an economic resource, however, each is also an individual, and the individuals have gone through something that I had not foreseen. Two events on the same day opened my eyes.

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 discolored fish and one that was half-blind. 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 popular spring creek -- the kind where every rise is likely to be 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 good score, he thought, but not fabulous. He would have to do twice as well to achieve 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 in my fishing a decade earlier, when I was

returning a trout to the stream despite a red stain left by my hook. I remember what Vince said, blunt and final: "Fishing is a blood sport."

It has been a blood sport forever. Some few million years ago, one of our ancestors -- yours and mine -- stuck a spear in 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.

Hunting and fishing are still the same sport at core, and letting your prey go is always an alternative. Perhaps, for example, you have rested cross-hairs on a buck's brisket and decided not to pull the trigger. That deer got off lightly, by comparison to a hooked trout.

A biologist tells me that an angler who releases many fish "may be doing a lot more damage than the guy who catches his two trout and goes home." The mortality ranges from negligible, at low temperatures, up to ten percent when the water warms. Economically speaking, most fish populations can sustain such a harvest. Ethically speaking, however, there is no such thing as no-kill fishing.

My focus, remember, has shifted from populations to individuals. Individual humans have always hunted individual prey -- deer and fish and woolly mammoths -- but until recently served them for dinner. This is the first century in which some of us (in the supermarket nations, at least) can afford to wash our hands of bloody old nature.

We still live on other life, though. Always have, always will. If you prefer, take Genesis as the 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" -- a score -- 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."

For me, each fish remains a "thou" if I catch only as many as my family would like for dinner. Sometimes they are tasty little trout from a stream that can spare them, in which case they are served with asparagus and white wine and stories -- if anyone will listen. More often I release the trout and keep their stories.

Mind you, restraint comes easy for a fellow who fishes often. If your appetite is greater, may you catch all you need -- as long as your prey remain creatures of flesh and blood. If they turn into scores, something has gone wrong.