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'Fishing for Fun': The Politics of Recreational Fishing

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Abstract

In this paper, I will seek to understand the peculiar politics of recreational fishing. While I will draw from international research, my focus here will be the problem as it is understood within Australia, a wealthy nation with high standards of living and relatively high participation rates in recreational fishing. The paper explores the conceptual issues that surround how we understand and frame recreational fishing as a form of hunting, drawing on Australian research to understand the extent and characteristics of this enterprise. The second section explores the institutional and epistemic dimensions of recreational fishing. I finally examine how animal advocates might move forward given the realities of the present political terrain.

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Abstract: In this paper, I will seek to understand the peculiar politics of recreational fishing. While I will draw from international research, my focus here will be the problem as it is understood within Australia, a wealthy nation with high standards of living and relatively high participation rates in recreational fishing. The paper explores the conceptual issues that surround how we understand and frame recreational fishing as a form of hunting, drawing on Australian research to understand the extent and characteristics of this enterprise. The second section explores the institutional and epistemic dimensions of recreational fishing. I finally examine how animal advocates might move forward given the realities of the present political terrain.

Keywords: recreational fishing, animal studies, fish, hunting

Recreational fishing can be defined as catching fish for fun. Added to the fun, there may be auxiliary benefits such as profit, food, and exercise. Nevertheless, the fun part is mandatory. Commercial or subsistence fisheries, on the other hand, are work, and even though work can be fun too (sometimes), it is not the primary motivation.

(Pitcher and Hollingworth, 1).

Over the last decade there has been a growing chorus of scientific evidence that fishes¹ have a capacity to suffer in a way that is comparable to land animals, and that fishes have cognitive abilities and emotional lives that have been previously underestimated (see Brown; Vila Pouca and Brown; Sneddon et al.).² This awareness of fish capacities is at odds with our prevailing treatment of fishes across a range of different areas of human activity, including wild fish capture and aquaculture production for human food supplies; the increased utilisation of fishes as research animals, and the presence of fishes as perhaps the most numerous domestic companion species.

Because of its sheer scale, some of the most pressing welfare concerns relate to the way in which fishes are treated in industrial production systems geared towards the human food supply (in this special issue, see Brown and Dorey). Less apparent as an area for potential advocacy is the practice of recreational fishing.³ There are different estimates of the global extent of recreational fishing: some studies suggest that (at least in the Global North) recreational fishing accounts for over 10% of total fish capture (see Arlinghaus, Tillner, and Bork; and Cooke and Cowx); other studies, such as Pauly and Zeller’s recent estimates of global fish capture, suggest that recreational fishing accounts for less than 1% of fishes caught (‘Catch Reconstructions’).⁴ The relatively ‘small proportion’ of fishes globally that are caught through recreational fishing activity might suggest that this activity is of less importance to animal advocates than industrial fishing and aquaculture. After all, not only are the bulk of the world’s fishes used by humans captured or bred through industrial scale processes, arguably the most

visceral animal welfare, environment and human rights concerns occur within wild fish capture and aquaculture contexts.

However, recreational fishing presents a unique set of challenges for animal advocates that are worthy of interrogation, and as I shall discuss, potentially offer a perplexing and complex problem to untangle. At least one challenge is that, despite recreational fishing representing a small proportion of total fishes caught, the numbers of fishes caught through recreational fishing are still immense: indeed, as I shall outline below, at least in Australia the number of fishes captured by recreational fishers rivals large scale land based operations, at least in the number of lives extinguished. Importantly, as I shall describe below, recreational fishing is a mass participation hunting activity, which is not only a practice engaged with by large sections of the human population, but also importantly, involves large scale engagement with children. For this reason, recreational fishing represents a highly unique challenge for animal advocacy.

For the purposes of this paper, I will understand recreational fishing as a modality of human predation or hunting directed at fishes and other sea animals for the *primary* purpose of pleasure, relaxation, sport or therapy. I am *excluding* subsistence fishing, including traditional fishing that might occur in some Indigenous communities, from this understanding of recreational fishing practices. I note though that separating recreational fishing from subsistence fishing practices is complex, since capture of fishes for food may be an indirect outcome of recreational fishing. However, as I shall outline below, it is possible from the data to make clear these differences. This allows us to just focus on ‘recreation’; that is, what Pitcher and Hollingworth have described in the above quotation as ‘fishing for fun’ (1).

While I will draw from international research, my focus here will be the problem as it is understood within Australia, a wealthy nation with high standards of living and, as I shall discuss, relatively high participation rates in recreational fishing. My choice here is deliberate. Recreational fishing practices are deeply shaped by culture and tradition, in a way that makes generalisation across different cultural traditions complex. In addition, reliable data does not exist in every jurisdiction, disallowing the possibility of a comprehensive global scale analysis (see Arlinghaus and Cooke). I note that while fishing participation rates in Australia are lower

than other countries, such as Lithuania and Finland, they are still relatively high in comparison to other countries with high living standards (see Arlinghaus, Tillner, and Bork). As such, Australia provides a useful focal point for this analysis.

I will refer in this paper to a particular body of research that is helpful for gaining a national picture of the place of recreational fishing within Australian society. In 2003, a National Recreational and Indigenous Fishing Survey was conducted in Australia to understand the incidence and characteristics of recreational fishing, both in terms of who was involved in this practice, but also the volume of animals impacted by this practice (Henry and Lyle). The survey also provides a useful separation between 'recreational' fishing practices, and those that serve subsistence goals, such as traditional fishing in some Indigenous communities. As such it is possible from this dataset to achieve a separation between recreational and subsistence forms of fishing as they are practiced within Australia. Indeed, at least one measure of the difference between these modalities of fishing is that recreational fishing practices are often accompanied by high 'release rates' (that is, fishes who are caught for recreational purposes and then returned to the water alive). On the other hand, the survey shows, 'negligible quantities of seafood ... were not retained' by Indigenous subsistence fishers (Henry and Lyle, 117). The survey thus helps us to 'zero in' on fishing whose primary purpose is fun and relaxation for the humans who practice it.⁵ Again, the aim in this paper is to understand 'recreational fishing' where the aim of this practice is not for commercial gain, or subsistence ends, but primarily for fun and relaxation. There are 'grey' areas here – for example, individuals who fish primarily for recreation but consume any fishes caught – however the impulse of this paper is to focus on 'recreation' as a primary driver for fishing activities, thus excluding small scale subsistence fishing, where this is the primary purpose. Again, this would also exclude focus in this paper on subsistence fishing by Indigenous communities: in my view, subsistence fishing by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities can only be analysed with any justice within a context that is cognizant of the histories of colonizing food practices which have accompanied settler colonial societies, and the important role of food sovereignty within the self-determination movements of Indigenous peoples.

Unfortunately, the 2003 National Recreational and Indigenous Fishing Survey was not repeated. States and territories in Australia have conducted their own surveys since; however, they have used ‘varying methods, therefore limiting the ability to compare jurisdictions and scale up results from surveys to provide a more recent national view of fishing activity’ (Evans, Bax and Smith). Nevertheless, while the 2003 National survey is now dated, it still offers a remarkable picture of the unique characteristics of recreational fishing as a modality of hunting.

Finally, I note that this paper does not contain discussion of the ethics of recreational fishing as such. Certainly, there are a range of ethical concerns that circulate recreational fishing (see for example Elder; de Leeuw; and Singer). However, this paper does not seek to enter a debate over whether it is ethical to ‘fish for fun’. Instead, I start with premise that recent evidence on fish sentience, cognition and emotion quite unambiguously posit recreational fishing as a highly problematic area of human practice, and worthy of stronger attention from animal advocates. Thus, the paper assumes that engagement in recreational fishing – that is, engaging in practices that cause pain and death to fishes for the primary purpose of ‘fun’ – represents an ethical problem, and moves instead to the political problem of how to untangle and challenge this form of violence.⁶ In some respects, as I shall argue below, recreational fishing reveals starkly the way that deeply structured human investments in systematic and unchecked violence towards animals is both part of our cultures, but simultaneously rendered innocuous, and banal, despite the gravity of the suffering and death that accompanies these practices. As such, addressing recreational fishing is one pathway towards directly challenging the violent anthropocentrism that broadly characterises human relations with animals.

The first section of this paper explores the conceptual issues that surround how we understand and frame recreational fishing as a form of hunting. The second section explores the institutional and epistemic characteristics of recreational fishing. And the conclusion of this paper examines how animal advocates might move forward given the realities of the present political terrain. This paper seeks to identify opportunities for action within the confines of a concrete political landscape. Despite the horrors that surround intensive forms of fish capture and production, there is surprisingly little work done by animal advocates⁷ to highlight the rights

and welfare of fishes (perhaps related to a range conceptual and epistemic problems that I shall discuss below). For animal advocates there is much work to do in drawing attention the routine violence and suffering imposed by large-scale fishing and aquaculture. However, there is also a challenge in highlighting smaller scale human violence towards animals in interpersonal practices, including recreational fishing. As such, the paper seeks to offer a reflection or political 'brief' for advocates working in the context of Australia, but hopefully one with broader appeal in different political jurisdictions.

A Unique Hunting Enterprise

All political conflicts involve some form of framing that allows political actors to comprehend and make sense of an issue, and understand the relations of power, tensions and attendant injustices that circulate around this issue. Some commentators, such as Carrie P. Freeman, have pointed out 'framing' is an essential part of the way in which individuals make sense of the world: 'Humans must mentally frame their everyday experiences to be able to cognitively comprehend and manage their reality and make decisions about appropriate actions. These frames serve to make things meaningful, organize experiences, and guide actions' (Freeman, 76). In a different register, framing reflects the ideological or perhaps epistemic dynamics that give shape to politics, marking some political issues as urgent and necessary of redress, making visible and invisible different forms of oppression, and making sense of (while simultaneously disallowing) particular modes of action.

Arguably, in the context of recreational fishing, animal advocates face a number of framing problems that pose challenges for how they might raise awareness about the treatment of fishes. One striking problem is how recreational hunting practices are understood within the context of animal advocacy, and their uncertain relationship to recreational fishing. Animal advocates have often understood recreational hunting practices – such as shooting wild deer or foxes for relaxation or 'sport' – as a site of moral and political contention (see for example Cohen; Cohn; Parry; and Kemmerer). Iconic protests by animal advocates against hunting have tended to focus on land-dwelling animals: foxes, ducks, deer and lions. However, fishes are not

ordinarily understood as ‘hunted’. We reserve the word ‘fishing’ for the peculiar form of human predation directed at fishes.⁸ Animal advocates arguably reproduce and play into this quite arbitrary differentiation, not only by maintaining a distinction in language between animals that are understood as ‘hunted’ and those that are ‘fished’; but also in the energy directed at campaigns which prioritise hunting of land animals as a problem, yet fail to draw attention, or the same attention, to the hunting of fishes as a similarly problematic modality of hunting. As I have stated, campaigns against recreational hunting are of iconic or symbolic importance within the history of animal advocacy; it is informative that these iconic campaigns are not directed towards human predation against fishes.⁹

This framing problem is arguably intensified when we consider the extent of recreational fishing as a form of hunting. Conventionally, recreational hunting is viewed as minority practice, with only small sections of communities engaged with direct acts of predation as recreation: for example in 2017, New South Wales issued 19,124 licences to recreational game hunters (RMCG, 6), representing a small proportion of the over 7 million residents in that state. Yet recreational fishing, as a form of hunting, offers an antidote to this assumption which assumes that recreational hunters represent a small constituency. The 2003 National Recreational and Indigenous Fishing Survey reveals that recreational fishing is extraordinarily widespread: 24.4% of households contained at least one person who had fished at in the 12 months prior to the survey being conducted (Henry and Lyle, 47). While the national rates of participation in fishing may have declined since the survey was conducted (see Evans, Bax and Smith), participation in recreational fishing remains high in many parts of Australia: for example in 2015/16 there was an estimated participation rate of 31.1% in Western Australia (Ryan et al., 1).

Recreational fishing not only involves large numbers of people, but leads to many animals being injured through the capture process, and potentially killed. As I have observed above, recreational fishing represents a slender proportion of total fishing: most fishes slaughtered at a global level are a product of industrialised wild capture fishing and aquaculture. However, the sheer numbers of fishes caught through recreational fishing practices is still

immense, and rivals slaughter figures (by number of lives taken) of land based industrial animal agriculture. The 2003 National survey, which attempted to provide a comprehensive picture of sea life captured by recreational fishers, including not only finfish, but creatures such as prawns, squid and abalone, estimated that 136 million organisms were 'harvested' in the survey year (Henry and Lyle, 69). To place this figure in perspective, in 2018 Australia slaughtered around 7 million cattle (ABS, see also USDA). Note, these figures in the national survey do not include the large number of fishes who are released or discarded, with release rates above 50% for many fishes (see Henry and Lyle, 85) who may have subsequently faced mortality as a result of trauma associated with capture (see Cooke and Sneddon). In other words, the scale of lives taken through the effort of recreational fishers is substantial.¹⁰ Here we find that while we might assume that hunting in many contexts, and certainly in Australia, is a small scale practice, this data reveals that recreational fishing is, on the other hand, a mass participation activity that involves a large number of households and leads to substantial death and injury for hundreds of millions of animals. This allows us, again, to glimpse the fundamental and more general framing problem related to how hunting is conceptualised by animal advocates. While the bulk of advocacy has focused on a narrow section of the hunting community, the reality of recreational fishing reveals that participation in hunting activities involves large sections of the community, and the scale of injury and death as a result of these practices is substantial.

In a related sense, animal advocates also face a framing problem, and substantial distortions of perspective, in how we understand *who* is responsible for recreational hunting. While there is growing scholarly interest in the increasing involvement of women in recreational hunting, at least as observed in some countries (see George, and Heberlein, Serup and Ericsson), contemporary recreational hunting is most often viewed as a practice carried out by those who identify as men, and understood as reproducing forms of violent masculinity (Luke 'Brutal'; Kheel; Twine; and Emel). Certainly much of this valuable literature has drawn connections between particular forms of hunting, such as trophy hunting, and the way that it might function as 'a relation of reciprocal communication and support with the predatory heterosexuality prominent in Western patriarchal society' (Luke, 'Violent love'). There is also a strong alignment with ecofeminist critiques of anthropocentrism, which track the relation between

this drive to conquer and dominate animals, connecting them with knowledge systems which assume human domination of nature, described by Val Plumwood as the 'master story of Western culture' (Plumwood, 196). However recognition of recreational fishing as a hunting activity forces a careful consideration of the way gender might interact with hunting as a practice. While it is true that, at least in Australia, the majority of people who engage in recreational fishing identify as men, the proportions of women who engage in this activity are substantial, with a two to one ratio reported in the national survey between men and women fishers respectively (Henry and Lyle, 49), a figure more or less replicated in more recent State based surveys (see for example West et al.). Thus, we are confronted here with a different picture of recreational hunting as it is traditionally understood within gender analyses. In the above-cited NSW study of recreational hunters, it is observed that 'recreational hunters are predominantly male, with 97 per cent of game hunting licence holders being male' (RMCG, 7). However, if we understand fishing as a hunting activity, then we must take the view that hunting 'for fun', while often practiced by men, is also practiced by a large number of women, since as the national fishing survey indicates, perhaps a third of fishers are women. This does not necessarily negate the work mentioned above that explores the relationships between some hunting practices and violent masculinities. But it does beckon deeper analysis of the different hunting cultures that exist, and the way in which gender relates to the prominent – arguably *most* prominent – form of recreational hunting: namely recreational fishing. Perhaps we might speculate that while recreational hunting of pigs, deer, foxes and other animals is dominated as a practice by men, and possibly inculcates cultures of violent masculinity, recreational fishing, on the other hand, is a peculiar form of hunting, which while still rehearsing cultures of masculine dominance, is permeable as practice to large numbers of those who identify as women.

But the above observations on gender and recreational fishing must also be considered in context with the remarkable data on the relationship between recreational fishing and age. The national survey I refer to above observes that the recreational fishing participation rates for persons under 18 years of age is substantially higher than the rest of the population: overall 28% of children aged 5-14 participated in recreational fishing during the year prior to the survey, a participation rate higher than any other age group identified in the research (Henry and Lyle,

49). These high rates of involvement of children in recreational fishing are replicated in more recent state based surveys (see for example West et al. 20; and Taylor, Webley and McInnes 16). Further, while those identified as boys make up a larger proportion of child recreational fishers, there is substantial participation from girls: in the national survey, of children aged 5-14, 33.2% of boys and 22.8% of girls participated in recreational fishing (Henry and Lyle, 49). Again, this works against prevailing intuitions of who is involved in recreational hunting. While we might imagine hunting as predominately an activity comprised of adult men, inclusion of recreational fishing as a hunting 'sport' produces a different picture: we are instead confronted by a reality of the mass participation of children in the recreational injuring and killing of animals. It is certainly worth noting that while it is legal in many jurisdictions to teach children to use a firearm for the purpose of recreational hunting (see Romensky), recreational fishing is perhaps unique in the relatively young age at which practitioners are inducted into this ritual of killing, utilising technologies of violence (i.e. weapons) which aim to capture and injure; indeed, many adults can remember being offered a line and baited hook at an early age, a reality confirmed by the inclusion of persons as young as of 5 years of age in the 2003 Survey. Further, there is scope for more consideration of the significant involvement of those identified as girls in recreational fishing. Where we might associate pedagogical practices around hunting with rituals associated with masculinity and bonding – 'an opportunity for fathers and sons to play together' (see Fine 812; see also Twine) – recreational fishing appears to offer a different picture, with girls very actively involved. This suggests a need for more careful analysis of how recreational fishing practices relate to gender norms, and therefore how we understand hunting as a gendered enterprise.

Institutions and Epistemologies

Recreational fishing does not merely exist as an example of *interpersonal* violence between humans and animals. It is also supported by institutions. As indicated above, recreational fishing is a mass participation hunting activity, which is circulated by longstanding cultures and traditions. These are reflected in deep institutional supports which validate and resource this

violence. As such, it is relevant to explore the way in which institutions – such as Governments – support recreational fishing activities. Further, as I shall discuss below, it is not just institutional violence we must consider, but also the epistemic dimensions; that is, how fishes are constructed and understood by our knowledge systems.

Recreational fishing, true to its name, is seen by some practitioners as therapeutic, presenting an opportunity to ‘relax and unwind’ (see Henry and Lyle, 96). Recreational fishing can even be considered ‘spiritual’ in nature, providing, against the backdrop of industrialised societies, a rare opportunity for the ‘purposive exercise of a fully sensed engagement with the natural world’ (Franklin, 221). There is, as a result, an institutional interest in the human ‘wellbeing’ and therapeutic benefits associated with recreational fishing (see McManus et al.) including for children (see Leonard). This purported affective relation between the recreational fisher and the environment has been targeted by various organisational interests, who perceive recreational fishing as an effective way to respond to individuals who need social support, such as those who have experienced a long-term mental illness. For example, the ‘Fly Program’ in NSW uses ‘fly fishing and mountain biking to combat the impacts of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide among Australian men’ (Travers). But injuring and killing fishes for therapy is not merely constrained to those who identify as men. There has also been a growing movement towards therapy programs for women (see Mundy) and at the same time, emerging discourses which highlight the apparently unique benefits of recreational fishing for these women. Anna Clark, in a recent article ‘Women who Fish’, stresses the opportunity for women to participate in this activity on an equal basis with men: ‘It’s a form of mindfulness – watching the tide come in, or the wind change, or the sun set. And that urge for quiet solitude and contemplation isn’t restricted to one half of the population’ (Clark).

At least one important vector in how we understand the institutional context of recreational fishing relates to widespread endorsement of this modality of fishing as an activity in harmony with goals of ecological sustainability. This means that, despite the many environmental sustainability challenges produced by recreational fishing (see Arlinghaus and Cooke 46-50), we face a perverse situation where there is strong institutional support, including

from international governance organisations, for discourses which imagine recreational fishers as having an ‘affinity for the environment’ and have faith that recreational fishing ‘can be a powerful tool for ... sustainable management of resources’ and may even ‘provide environmental benefits’ (UNFAO, ‘The role of’). Thus, it is no surprise that the discourses of environmental sustainability and union with nature which surround recreational fishing (see Elder 293) should mirror the narratives we have seen emerge around recreational hunters as ‘eco-buddies’ (see Littlefield and Ozanne 350-51; see also Kheel 35-6; and Cohen).

Formal institutional support, as discussed above, for recreational fishing is provided by a range of organisations, sometimes directly aided and abetted by the State. In jurisdictions such as Western Australia, government departments openly work with (and contract) non-government peak bodies such as Recfishwest to support the interests of recreational fishers (see Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development). One area of intervention is in directly resourcing the expansion of the supply of fishes that might be hunted by recreational fishers. Here, governments use socio-technical intervention to expand the numbers of fishes that might be available to be killed through large-scale programs of breeding and ‘fish stocking’ of estuaries. For example, a 2005 New South Wales fish stocking strategy claims that ‘over the past 43 years ... [the Department of Primary Industries] ... aided by acclimatisation societies, angling clubs, conservationists and volunteers, have stocked over 86 million freshwater fishes comprised of 12 species (natives and salmonids) into the waters of New South Wales’ (NSW Department of Primary Industries). Here, the State does not merely passively endorse direct human violence against animals, but actively expands and facilitates opportunities for this practice as a public good.¹¹

Governments can also actively support recreational fishing through government programs that support individuals to learn fishing skills. In some cases, and relevant to the above discussion, children are directly the targets of these institutionally supported practices. For example, there is evidence in Australia of State governments supporting recreational fishing through education programs, such as the ‘Get Hooked: Its Fun to Fish’ program run by the New South Wales Department of Primary Industries. The program targets primary school aged

children, with the aim of providing ‘students with the basic skills necessary for recreational fishing with the view that it will become a lifelong interest’ (NSW Department of Primary Industries). Note that such school-age training can also be interlinked with other marine education, including initiatives such as the Western Australian ‘Dissect a Fish’ program (Government of Western Australia). Recreational fishing here is seen as a core element of training in civic participation, established early as a ground for flourishing and lifelong personal development. I note another area where institutional support for recreational fishing has emerged is in relation to inclusion programs for people with disability, such as the ‘Fishability’ program in Western Australia, which ‘works with the community to promote fishing activities as a means of acceptance and inclusion while developing self-confidence and growing social skills’ (Busselton Mail).

It is worth stressing that in Australia the economic value of the industry is probably significant: one study suggests a total economic value of over AUD \$2.5 billion in 2013, with over AUD \$1.5 billion of this total reflecting expenditure on fishing gear and boats (Colquhoun, 6). In other words, there are strong vested interests in recreational fishing, not only from practitioners, but also from industries that provide the means to chase down, injure and kill fishes.

These economic interests, the large-scale participation in recreational fishing I have described above, and the strong institutional support provided by Government and non-government organisations, helps to explain the powerful economic and political forces that shape the way recreational fishing might emerge in public debate. In Australia, there are influential political lobby groups, such as the national and state-based Shooters and Fishers parties, which have achieved electoral success. These parties are certainly capable of holding the balance of power in parliaments and using this to achieve expanded hunting rights, such as occurred in New South Wales in 2013 (Clennell), and have arguably helped to build conceptions of ‘conservation hunting’ where ‘pest’ animals are targeted by recreational hunters (see Chen, 304-05).¹² However, we can understand political influence in more expansive ways than through measuring electoral achievement. As I have indicated above, there is strong, perhaps

unquestioned, endorsement of recreational fishing as a public good by Governments in Australia, which can produce a favourable policy environment that reflects good will towards recreational fishers, recognising these interests directly in funded programs that expand opportunities for recreational fishing practices to occur. Intervention into nature to enhance fish populations in order to meet the demands of recreational fishers also shapes the electioneering strategies of major parties: in 2017 the Western Australian government made a pre-election pledge to create artificial reefs and install fish aggregating devices with the aim of ‘creating more fishing opportunities and increasing stocks of pink snapper, barramundi, mulloway, blue swimmer crabs and river prawns’ (Roberts).

I want, finally, to emphasise the epistemic problem that circulates around fishes, highlighted in part by the discussion above. Scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describe the concept of ‘epistemic violence’ as the process by which knowledge systems silence particular subjects, removing recognition and rendering them invisible (see Spivak). I have previously described how this same process can be usefully applied to thinking about anthropocentrism, which systematically denies animal capability, intelligence and suffering, often with the aim of constructing human superiority (see Wadiwel, *War*; and Wadiwel ‘Do Fish Resist?’). The above analysis reinforces the sense that while animal advocates currently face the problem that all animals are devalued by anthropocentric knowledge systems, there is an added problem when it comes to fishes, since sea animals *frequently do not appear to even count as animals*. Almost everywhere we look, the routine understandings, recognition and responsiveness that are applied to land-based animals appear to be missing when we turn to fishes. This means that in both industrial and recreational utilisation of fishes by humans, these animals are not afforded the same mitigations from human violence – through welfare – that are often (but certainly not always) applied to land animals; worse, where egregious breaches of the basic welfare of land animals attracts condemnation from the public, including voiced opposition from animal advocates, there appears to be an uncanny silence surrounding human treatment of fishes.

Fishes also pose a different epistemic problem that challenges ‘commonsense’ understandings of the theories of change that seem to underpin animal advocacy. Animal

liberation and animal protection organisations frequently rely on visual reminders of human abuse towards animals as a political repertoire for change: for example, animal welfare organisations will share footage of animal abuse with news outlets to prompt public outrage, while some radical vegan organisations will shock members of the public by showing them graphic footage from slaughterhouses. In these cases, there is a faith that a confrontation of knowledge and values through enhanced visibility and transparency will lead to reform. There is also here a conviction that most humans are negatively impacted by the sight of violence against animals and would not actually want to be involved in the grisly business of killing animals. This sense that visibility and proximity will lead to change is perhaps echoed by some scholars in the field, who have argued that enhanced visibility will lead to enhanced protection (see for example O'Sullivan). However, the above analysis of fishes reminds us that if it is true that visibility is a useful strategy for improving the welfare of land animals, this same politics does not necessarily apply to sea animals. In fishing, we are faced with a mass participation activity, one that involves a high level of involvement of both men and women, boys and girls. And against the above intuitions, intimate involvement in catching animals, watching them suffer or die, does not necessarily stir empathy or respect in the way that animal advocates might predict. Fishes are epistemically constructed by prevailing knowledge systems in such a way that doing violence to them does not appear to register or impact those who perpetrate it; indeed, as I have described above, inflicting this violence is considered broadly 'therapeutic'.

Conclusion: Where do animal advocates go from here?

I have argued elsewhere that the mainstay relationship between humans and animals is one of hostility and violence, where humans systematically seek to dominate animals to make them serve human needs and desires (Wadiwel, *War*). Further, this violence is carefully shaped by human knowledge systems, continually rendering outright hostility and domination of animals as peaceable, mutually beneficent or invisible (Wadiwel, *War*). The above analysis of fishes appears only to confirm this view. Where my previous work has mostly been concerned with institutional and epistemic modes of human violence towards animals (see Wadiwel, *War* 29-36), the above discussion highlights the way institutions, social practices and knowledge conspire

to support a form of intersubjective violence between humans and animals that involves mass participation of adults and children and appears to draw little or no public opposition.

While this picture is overwhelming, there are a few possibilities for reform that present themselves to animal advocates. Firstly, as discussed above, animal advocates themselves have arguably participated in reproducing this epistemic violence directed towards fishes. While some advocacy organisations have taken steps towards providing information on fishes and supporting improvements in welfare protections for fishes, the contemporary history of both the animal welfare and animal rights movement appears to support a view that land animals have been largely given the priority in high profile campaigning for much of the last 50 years. It certainly appears perverse that fishes are numerically the most utilised animal on earth and the most hunted animals on earth (ranging from industrial scale mechanised predation to recreational fishing), yet animal advocates appear to have largely ignored this site of human domination of animals. That animal advocates have spent so little time exposing this large-scale violence towards animals reminds us of the deep epistemic challenges that surround recognition of fishes, their welfare and their rights. Stronger messaging, and enhanced campaigning from advocates would surely only help to change this situation; and this in turn will help address different facets of the welfare and rights problems that surround human utilisation of fishes, including in recreational fishing practices.

Secondly, attitudinal change is possible, but as the above analysis indicates, change will be slow, given that we face 'welded on' cultural and social practices that enjoy broad public and institutional support. However, we face a dilemma here. The emerging science on fishes' sentience, cognition and emotion places recreation fishing ('fishing for fun') in the same ethical grey zone as other forms of recreational hunting. It is true that catch and release recreational fishing appears particularly problematic given that the intention is not to kill: these animals are chased, tormented when hooked, and then released with injuries and possible death due to these injuries (see Cooke and Sneddon) for the direct purpose of 'recreation'. In this context it may be tempting for animal advocates to problematise the behaviour of recreational fishers as displaying outright cruelty and therefore lacking ethical consideration. However, given the mass participation of individuals in these practices, it is not clear what this sort of strategy will mean in terms of political effectiveness or what negative repercussions this may generate for animal

advocates themselves. Given the high participation rate of children in recreational fishing, it is dubious whether a small number of animal advocates 'calling out' fishers as 'unethical' will achieve the intended political outcome of reduced participation. A different approach though might be to explore long term education and information directed at children to slowly shift attitudes and counter the overwhelming and near hegemonic discourses from parents, communities, institutions and governments which encourage children and young people to engage in fishing activities. There are certainly examples of education programs directed at school-age children which aim at attitudinal change around animals and their welfare (see for example Nicoll, Trifone and Samuels; Thompson and Gullone; and Arbour, Signal and Taylor), and perhaps this sort of approach is appropriate, particularly given the high rates of child participation in recreational fishing.

Finally, it is worth emphasising that like all social and cultural practices, a range of structural factors make recreational fishing desirable or not desirable as an activity, including issues such as accessibility, costs and licensing, and available free time (see Arlinghaus, Tillner, and Bork). In this context it is perhaps useful for advocates to reflect on the indirect strategies available to animal advocates that might help to reduce the number of animals injured or killed through recreational fishing. A 2007 study noted that there had been a decline in recreational fishing rates in Queensland over the previous two decades (see Sutton). The study suggests that a number of factors can be attributed to this, including the high cost of fishing gear, the burden of regulation and the crowding of fishing areas (see Sutton, 78). However, availability of substitute leisure activities was also a factor in the decline in participation rates, with many causal recreational fishers finding better things to do: indeed, the author notes that 'more committed fishers do indeed have fewer leisure activities that compete with fishing' (Sutton, 82). This reminds us that at least one strategy for animal advocates to explore is to offer alternatives to fishing as recreation. Providing ways to offer pleasurable alternatives to hunting, injuring and killing animals 'for fun' of course provides a direct route towards challenging the epistemic dimension of human violence towards animals. Providing people alternatives might be one way to challenge this ongoing and pointless hostility.

Notes

¹ ‘Fishes’ being the plural at the level of species, denoting the diversity under consideration.

² It is possible to get a sense of this consensus by examining the open peer review debate that has occurred, as hosted by the journal *Animal Sentience* (see Key and the accompanying articles; and Sneddon et al., and the accompanying responses).

³ In this paper I refer to the politics of recreational fishing as a domain of human contestation; particularly between animal advocates and those who support and participate in recreational fishing as a practice. I have explored the question of power relations between humans and fish (see Wadiwel, ‘Do Fish Resist?’ and Wadiwel ‘Fish and Pain’), which is frankly, the most prominent site of political contestation when we consider the politics of recreational fishing.

⁴ I have calculated this based on Pauly and Zellers figures supplied in the supplementary tables (see Pauly and Zeller, ‘Catch Reconstructions’, Supplementary Information, Table 4) which suggests that globally in 2010 recreational fishing accounted for 808,357 tonnes of fish caught in that year, in comparison to a combined total of 108,179,151 tonnes of industrial, artisanal, subsistence or discarded fish caught that same year.

⁵ Of course, this does not mean that Indigenous people are not involved in recreational fishing practices as defined above, or that traditional subsistence forms of fishing might not be considered recreational by practitioners. The 2014 NSW recreational fishing survey, while excluding the analysis of Indigenous traditional fishing practices that was included in the National survey (see Henry and Lyle), makes a point of stressing that ‘any recreational fishing by indigenous residents ... was included’ (West et al., 6).

⁶ I use the word ‘violence’ here in a technical sense to describe an act of force or coercion directed towards other beings, often aimed at establishing a relation of political domination (see Wadiwel, *War Against Animals*, 29-36)

⁷ I have used the phrase ‘animal advocates’ here as an umbrella term for those seeking to improve the welfare or rights of animals, or seeking to reduce domination, violence and

suffering experienced by animals as result of human engagement. I have done so pragmatically to allow for this paper to speak to diverse political constituencies within animal advocacy movements. Naturally, there are historical and philosophical divisions between groupings that might be thus described as ‘animal advocates’; for example, between animal liberationists and animal welfarists. It is conceded that political strategy and goals will differ radically between these movements, perhaps in irreconcilable ways.

⁸ Fish are also understood as ‘harvested’: a term applied to wild fish capture, but also to some animals such as chickens (see Wadiwel ‘Do Fish Resist’ and Wadiwel ‘Chicken Harvesting Machine’). It is true that some sea animals – such as whales – may be understood as hunted, but this only seems to highlight that ‘hunting’ is a mode of understanding a form of human predation directed at a group of animals that we regard as substantially different from ‘mere fish’. Perhaps we might speculate that we humans regard whales as having a dignity that exceeds other sea creatures; the latter we would simply ‘fish’ or ‘harvest’ rather than ‘hunt’ under this logic.

⁹ This problem appears particularly acute given the context of mass scale mechanised predation that characterises industrial global wild fish capture: the most extensive technological refinement of human predation has arguably occurred in the seas, and not on land.

¹⁰ The implications are substantial at global level: while recreational fishing contributes a small amount to global wild fish capture, this contribution is nevertheless large in terms of sheer volume, and perhaps underestimated (see Cooke and Cowx).

¹¹ Note the very strong logics of ‘biopolitical violence’ which shape these institutional interventions, which aim to birth animals *en masse* in order for them to be killed through private enterprise (see Wadiwel, *War*). Note also that these programs quite directly resonate with a Keynesian approach to fiscal economic management, where governments aim to create or stimulate opportunities for private enterprise to flourish as a mechanism for sustaining generalised economic benefit. In a famous section of *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, Keynes remarks: ‘If the Treasury were to fill old bottles with banknotes, bury them at

suitable depths in disused coalmines which are then filled up to the surface with town rubbish, and leave it to private enterprise on well-tryed principles of laissez-faire to dig the notes up again (the right to do so being obtained, of course, by tendering for leases of the note-bearing territory), there need be no more unemployment and, with the help of the repercussions, the real income of the community, and its capital wealth also, would probably become a good deal greater than it actually is. It would, indeed, be more sensible to build houses and the like; but if there are political and practical difficulties in the way of this, the above would be better than nothing' (Chapter 10). Surely, this is precisely what governments appear to be doing in breeding fish in order stimulate recreation fishing, the exception here being that the recreational fishers pursue fish for leisure, and the economic benefits are thus indirect. Keynes' scepticism of the strategy offers a useful approach for animal advocates: rather than Governments stimulating economic activity by breeding fishes so that recreational hunters can extinguish them, it would certainly be 'more sensible to build houses and the like'.

¹² Peter Chen also observes that the establishment of the NSW Game Council in 2002 'served both to institutionalise regulation of hunting in an autonomous agency away from direct departmental control, and to incorporate an advocate for the general policy orientation of the ...[Shooters and Fishers Party]... within government' (310).

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