

Who is to decide whether C&R fishing is morally right or wrong?

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With the recent press release by the Finnish Animal Protection Organisation on banning C&R fishing due to ethical grounds (which Markus mentions in his blog), I thought it would be worthwhile to discuss in more depth the reasons for why there is a trend across Europe to ban C&R and what the consequences of such a ban would be.

The “trend” stems from scientific (empirical) evidence showing that fish perceive pain and the negative effects that C&R may have. The pain can obviously not be compared to pain that humans feel. However, the evidence that fish perceive “some kind” of pain cannot be overlooked, as there are no empirical studies disproving the findings or showing that the studies made were flawed.

Dr Martin Stålhammar from Lund University completed a PhD on the topic ‘Catch & Release in recreational fisheries’ in 2013. He presented the results from his thesis during the Pike Seminar 25.9.2014 in Vaasa. The video of his presentation and powerpoint (in Swedish) can be found on <http://www.kvarkenfishing.fi/seminar-presentations>. I have selected some parts from Stålhammar’s thesis to hopefully give an objective view on C&R from a fisheries management view:

“C&R can result in altered behaviour, indirect or direct mortality for the fish., but we should not forget the benefits. C&R will undoubtedly decrease direct mortality compared to traditional “catch and kill” fisheries. By releasing the fish alive, the impact from angling is minimized, which bears the potential to minimize the negative effects on fish stocks (Arlinghaus et al. 2002) but requires knowledge and good practice. Moreover, C&R allows the conservation of large and old fish, and allows immature fish to reproduce and secure future reproduction, provided that caught and released fish survive unharmed (Arlinghaus et al. 2007).” “Recreational fishing, which includes C&R, is not only important to human welfare and wellbeing for those who fish, it also has economic and social value...”

Stålhammar concludes that although C&R can have some negative effects on some species and age-classes, the benefits compared to “catch and kill” are noteworthy. Stålhammar also touches

on the criticism that C&R faces: “Some commentators argue that, due to ethical grounds, catching fish without the intention to consume them is unethical”. According to Stålhammar this philosophical question on whether C&R is morally right or wrong is beyond the scope of a thesis, which focuses the effects of C&R and use as a management method.

But who is to decide the answer to the philosophical question on whether C&R is morally right or wrong? Have the animal protection organisations the right to do so, and influence the politicians to take similar standpoints, without considering the consequences of such a ban? If a ban is going to be put in place, a few questions first need to be considered. Is it going to be obeyed among those who practiced C&R? If not, who is going to monitor the practice and who will pay for this? Let’s then consider the (unlikely) scenario that the ban is followed, or/and a good monitoring system is in place. Consequences? Hundreds of thousands of people’s pastime will be taken away, and their wellbeing (these would be the responsible fishermen that do not want to negatively affect the fish populations), and/or the fish populations are put in jeopardy by lots of fish caught being killed. It is perhaps one thing to answer a philosophical question on what is morally right or wrong, and another to take a political decision on an issue that has so many more facets.

An alternative to banning C&R is working together to promote and putting rules in place for best practice C&R. However, wishing to stay objective, I am also going to propose that sport fishermen consider the possibility that fish perceive pain during the fishing event, and whether there is a moral dilemma.