

**Just Throw Them Back:
The Ethical Dilemma of Catch-and-Release Fishing**

by

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When I was ten years old, my father changed my life: he bought a coffee table book, selected solely because its color scheme matched that of our living room, by a traditional British fly fisher named Charles Jardine. I already enjoyed throwing small spinning lures at trout, but I had never seen or read anything about fly fishing. On one long and boring summer day I decided to thumb through the book, only to find myself enthralled for hours by the pictures of fly line, trout, and flies. I read the book three times in three weeks, and I never recovered from that addiction.

It might sound strange for a fourth grader to become enthralled with what is often called "the last quiet sport," but I am not the first member of my family to catch the bug. My father used to go fishing with his father every weekend and bring home bass, bluegill, catfish, and crappie. He ate so many of those mercury-contaminated fish that he still sets off metal detectors in airports. But after my grandfather died young of lung cancer, my father gave up fishing. The experience was not the same for him without his closest fishing partner. Twenty years passed before he started fishing again. When I became a fanatic, my father came with me on occasional father-son fishing trips. We otherwise spent little time together and had few common interests, so I enjoyed his company. Hearing my father tell stories about my grandfather's fishing excursions brought me closer to both of these men. Fly fishing has enriched every aspect of my life since the age of ten. It helped me establish common ground with a

father whom I was often at odds with, and a connection with a grandfather whom I never met.

However, I sometimes feel a sense of guilt when I catch a fish. It is not because I am an irresponsible fly fisher. I follow all of the unwritten laws of the fly fishing community. I always release my catch back into the wild so that I do not hurt fish populations. To reduce the damage that I do to fish, I use barbless hooks and minimize handling time. I also wade carefully, make sure that I leave the stream cleaner than it was, and use only non-toxic materials. But after taking all these precautions, I wonder if catch and release itself is immoral. Is it right to catch fish for one's own pleasure? Fishing for food simply transforms the angler into another member of the food chain, looking for a meal. But when one practices catch-and-release fishing, fish are yanked out of the water for the angler's enjoyment. Even though the fish are better off than they would be if they were eaten, it is not necessary for them to be hooked in the first place. Does this make catch and release wrong? Should fly fishers only catch fish they intend to eat? I want to know what I, personally, should do. When I am accused of hurting fish unnecessarily, I usually mumble something about insensitive nerve endings or the kindness I show in not eating my catch. These excuses satisfy some skeptics, but they are not enough to stop me from doubting the morality of my own actions. I want to either find a moral defense or find that catch and release is morally indefensible. For me, fly fishing is more than just catching fish, and I won't forsake it unless I believe it to be inherently wrong. But if catch and release is nothing but pointless cruelty, my conscience might not allow me to continue fly fishing.

As a self-proclaimed environmentalist, I feel the need to confirm that my actions

do not damage the ecosystem. I would seriously doubt the morality of catch-and-release fishing if I learned that it cripples fisheries. The research on this matter suggests that catch-and-release fishing, when used in moderation, has a small, and even negligible, impact on the ecosystem. However, intense catch-and-release fishing has the capability to lower fish populations. One study published in the *North American Journal of Fisheries Management* investigated the impact of catch-and-release fishing tournaments on bass populations (Allen et al. 1252). Researchers looked at nine lakes in three states and simulated the number of deaths that would usually be caused by intense catch-and-release fishing. They concluded that “[t]ournament-associated mortality may not significantly influence most largemouth bass fisheries. However, in lakes where tournament catch was substantially higher than harvest, tournament-associated mortality could encompass a large portion of fishing-associated mortality” (Allen et al. 1252). So I could actually be damaging fisheries when I catch and release. Do I have to stop fly fishing to live up to my environmentalist ideals?

Before I jump to conclusions, I need to point out that this information might not pertain to me. The study said that most fisheries were unaffected by recreational angling. And fish that are caught and released in tournaments have a much higher mortality rate than fish caught and released by recreational anglers (Allen et al. 1252). Whereas casual anglers just throw fish back into the water, tournament anglers put fish under significantly more stress. After being caught, fish are placed in a live well, a large water-filled container inside of a boat’s hull. They are then transported to a weighing station on the shore, where they are weighed, measured, and photographed before being returned to the wild. They are often released far from their homes, a practice

that makes for a difficult adjustment for territorial fish, such as largemouth bass.

Reinstating themselves in a new home is not easy when most good holes are taken. This puts fish under enormous stress and often causes mortality rates that far exceed ordinary recreational levels (Graeb et al. 1). So, this evidence suggests that as long as I do not fish the same place hard and often, I do not damage the ecosystem. If everyone fished in the same place with me, I might contribute to the larger problem, but I won't let my mother's "If everyone did that" argument stop me from fishing.

But this brings up another question. How much damage does catch and release do to fish? In April of 2003, the worst suspicions of fishermen and animal rights activists were confirmed when a team of Scottish animal biologists announced that fish feel pain. After bee venom and acid were injected into the lips of the trout, they "rocked back and forth, rubbing their lips in the gravel beds of their tanks" (Parfit 1). Their reaction was almost human. The article, published in *Smithsonian*, compares fishing to "hunting, bullfighting and boxing" and accuses catch-and-release fishers of "indulging in wanton cruelty" (Parfit 1). This is a harsh critique of a traditionally accepted sport. However, after hearing this new evidence that fish feel and respond to pain, it is hard to argue that catch and release is harmless.

Further studies also suggest that fish feel more than a momentary sense of pain. There are physiological ramifications for fish that are unlucky enough to bite a hook. An article from the *Transactions of the American Fisheries Society* describes a huge strain on the hearts of smallmouth bass after being caught and released. They conclude that "(1) angling duration should be minimized, (2) angling at high as well as low temperatures may be detrimental, and (3) even when fish are angled very quickly, they

still undergo a period of increased cardiac output that can last as long as 1 h[our]" (Schreer, Cooke, and McKinley 1). That is, the fish are so panicked that their heart rate might not return to normal for as long as an hour after the end of the fight. That could make it harder for fish to hunt for food, to mate, and to do everything that they must do to survive. Another study concluded that largemouth bass endure a "significant physiological disturbance" when caught in catch-and-release tournaments (Suski et al., "Physiological" 760). The only comfort one can glean from that study is the information that "there is no evidence that these events normally result in serious cell damage" (Suski et al., "Physiological" 760). The idea that there is a significant chance that fish will experience "serious cell damage" is not a happy thought to a fly fisher who likes to keep fish alive and unharmed. And these gloomy revelations continue. "Physiological Response of Largemouth Bass to Angling Stress," a study that describes the effect that being caught has on bass, says that full recovery is, "almost complete within about 8 h[ours]" (Gustaveson, Wydoski, and Wedemeyer 629). That is a long time for a fish to be at less than full strength. Does that hurt their chances of survival? Yes. Five to ten percent of released striped bass do not survive being caught, even if proper release measures are used. And that percentage is in direct proportion to the amount of time the fish is on the line (Tomasso and Isely 321). It seems that the longer the fight, the worse it is for the fish. Suddenly, the epic, *Old Man and the Sea*-style fights sound like cruel and unusual punishment. Animal rights websites are even more explicit about damage to fish. They emphasize the intelligence of the suffering fish to garner sympathy for a strict anti-fishing stance. FishingHurts.com goes a little over the top by claiming that the "cognitive powers" of fish "match or exceed those of 'higher'

vertebrates, including non-human primates" ("The Hidden" 2). The site asks, "Have you ever seen an injured dog who has been hit by a car or a cat who's been seriously hurt in a fight?" ("The Hidden" 3), equating fly fishing with running over puppies with cars. PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) takes the idea even further on their website. The organization claims that fish are smart enough to "make tools" and engage in "Machiavellian strategies of manipulation" ("Fishing" 1). The detailed descriptions of the intelligence of fish stop just short of cell phone use and brain surgery. One would think that "Machiavellian fish" would be smart enough to not be caught at all.

But PETA crazies aside, the scientific evidence is overwhelming. A brutal picture of fishing emerges after reading all these reports. A fish, just trying to find a meal, suddenly feels a searing pain in its lip. It panics, and its heart rate increases exponentially as it fights for its life. It struggles until it nearly dies of lactic acid build-up and exhaustion (Sosin 211). It is then pulled out of the water, and its protective layer of mucus is removed by the fisherman's rough hand. After gasping at air for up to a minute, it is suddenly thrown back into the water. The stunned, damaged, and exhausted fish spends many hours recovering from the physical and mental strain. Assuming, of course, that it survives at all.

But nothing comes close to the damage that catch-and-release fishing unleashes on spawning fish, especially black bass. Every spring, when the water temperature reaches about sixty degrees, largemouth and smallmouth bass move into the shallows to spawn. They build nests, lay their eggs, and then stay there to feed and watch their offspring. The males guard the nest for a good period of time after

spawning is complete. This biological cycle is common knowledge to bass fishers. Why? Because spawning fish are incredibly easy to catch, and therefore they are specifically targeted. I doubt there is a bass fisherman in the United States who does not know when spawning season begins and ends on his local lake. Spawning season means that huge, trophy fish can be caught in the shallows. In a bass fishing guidebook, Mark Sosin and Bill Dance, two of the most well-known and respected bass fishermen in the country, recommend targeting spawning fish:

The coming of spring not only pumps adrenaline through the veins of every bass master, but their quarry also becomes more active. Warming waters send bass into the shallows to feed and to spawn, making it the perfect time of year to fill stringers. (131)

The moral implications of fishing in this "perfect time of year" are ignored by these two esteemed authors, who advocate taking advantage of the parental instincts of spawning fish. One recent study concluded, "Male largemouth and smallmouth bass were quite vulnerable to angling while guarding their nests" (Suski and Philipp 1100). The study's researchers also concluded that, "vulnerability to angling correlated positively with the quantity of eggs in a male's nest" (Suski and Philipp 1100). So these fish are caught because they think that their eggs, in effect their children, are in danger. They do not respond to an angler out of hunger; they respond out of instinct. And the better the parent, the better the chance of being caught. Is this really "sporting"?

Not only are spawning fish vulnerable to fishing, but they are also more fragile than they would otherwise be. Another study published in *Transactions of the American*

Fisheries Society found that nest-guarding smallmouth bass that had been caught and released could not effectively guard their nests. The study said that "offspring in the nests of fish played to exhaustion were exposed to more predation risk" (Kieffer 1). This conclusion was supported by another study in the same journal, which stated, "[A]fter catch-and-release events, angled males were less willing or less able to defend their broods than were control fish" (Suski et al., "The Effect" 210). That means that the next generation of bass is at risk. Fishing during spawning season affects the ecosystem and damages bass populations.

These facts are alarming. When I catch and release a spawning fish, I take advantage of that fish's parental instincts and hurt its ability to defend its nest. No matter what precautions I take, I will damage the fish, and maybe even the fish's offspring. And I cannot possibly prevent this damage, because I can't keep the fish from getting tired or having its lip pierced by a hook. Is it even possible for catch and release to be morally justified?

To answer this question, one must understand why catch and release became so popular in the first place. The idea has been around for many years, but as most fly fishers know, it was first popularized in the United States by the work and writings of the esteemed fly fisher Lee Wulff, who wrote several books and invented a fly that has been a staple pattern for anglers for more than 75 years. I actually have five Royal Wulffs in my own fly box. His wife was also a champion fly caster. In the 1930s, he pushed for a new idea called catch and release by famously stating that "gamefish are too valuable to be caught only once" (qtd. in Evans 196). For Wulff, this made perfect sense. As a fly fisher, he saw that America's fisheries were being rapidly

depleted by excessive over-fishing. He saw fishermen bring home dozens of fish, some of which certainly went to waste. He was, in short, concerned that the resource he loved and depended on was on the brink of extinction. This was not a moral argument. He did not argue that people had no right to kill fish, and he certainly did not worry about the rights of the fish themselves. It was pure conservation; he simply worried that America would run out of fish.

But as time progressed, this practical measure designed to preserve fish populations morphed into a moral ideal. Today, most American catch-and-release anglers are placed, or place themselves, on a higher moral pedestal than other anglers. Sosin and Dance, who are two of the most famous bass fishermen of the modern era, describe catch-and-release anglers as people “who have the inner confidence that they can catch bass and don’t constantly have to prove this fact to anyone who happens to be standing on the dock” (212). Ralph Cutter, a highly respected fly fisherman from the Sierra Nevadas, states, “[I]t must be clear to even the most ignorant person that if everyone kills his limit of fish, there will not be enough fish to go around...*Catch and release has come of age*” (55). And the “Federation of Fly Fishers Code of Angling Ethics” takes the righteousness of catch and release for granted:

Fly anglers endeavor to conserve fisheries by understanding the importance of limiting their catch. “Catch and release” is an important component of sustaining premium fisheries that are being over-harvested. Fly anglers release fish properly and with minimal harm. They promote the use of barbless hooks and angling practices that are more challenging but which help to sustain healthy

fish populations. (*Federation 2*)

American fly fishing culture has embraced the idea that fishers who release their catch operate on a higher moral plane than other fishers. Almost all fly fishing guides forbid their clients to keep fish. Most fly fishers always catch and release, even if it is not required by law, because they believe that it is morally right. This moral crusade sometimes reaches the point of being ridiculous. I myself have gone fly fishing, caught a dozen or so fish, released them, and returned home to eat a meal of fish from the supermarket without ever realizing the irony of the situation.

Particularly zealous fly fishers have gone to extremes to impose their ethical catch- and-release code on others. A section of my home river in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, the Truckee, is under strict regulations. It is reserved for "wild trout" and only allows the use of barbless hooks. The fish aren't actually wild; they just are not raised in a hatchery and planted in the river, but that does not matter to most fly fishers. Because of these regulations, and the fact that you can catch a 22-inch brown trout on a dead-drifted crayfish pattern, it has been virtually taken over by catch-and-release fly fishers. The law states that two fish can be kept, but the unwritten law is that you keep nothing. Rogue fly fishers have keyed cars, flattened tires, and verbally abused people who eat fish. Throwing rocks into the water to scare fish away from fishers who want to keep fish is not unheard of. And if someone complains to the sheriff after being attacked because he or she was fishing for food, the sheriff usually offers little or no sympathy. The local district attorney and judge are both dedicated catch-and-release fly fishermen.

However, the idea that catch and release is a moral duty has not spread to the

rest of the world. Catch-and-release fishing is considered to be nothing more than pointless cruelty in every country except for the United States, Great Britain, and Canada. Many other nations have banned catch and release in their waters because of animal rights concerns. For example, The Norwegian Council for Animal Ethics was asked if catch and release should be introduced as a resource management tool in Norway (Norwegian 1). Its conclusion is interesting because it was supposed to be a fisheries management decision, not a moral one. But after spending most of its time discussing the various advantages and disadvantages of catch-and-release fishing from a management perspective, the council switched to a moral discussion in its conclusion:

Many parents attempt to teach their children respect for living creatures and nature. One shall not fish more than one needs for food. One does not fish to throw away the catch, even if fishing is fun. That is a waste of resources. If one continues fishing just to release all the fish one catches, one is causing unnecessary suffering. (Norwegian 3)

In other words, the Council rejects the idea that fishing for fun is morally right, saying that “[t]he purpose of hunting and fishing, including when it is done for recreation, has been to procure food” (Norwegian 2). Members of the Council knew that tourist dollars from catch and release fishing would bolster the economy and probably not hurt the fishery, but they chose to sacrifice that money because they regarded the practice of catching fish for enjoyment as cruel.

The cultural conflicts surrounding catch and release is best described in a story told by a fly fisherman on an online fishing forum. This man went on a fishing trip with a

friend in Singapore. He first mortified his host by refusing to fish with bait, which is the traditional method, because it damaged fish to the point that they could not be released. Instead, the dedicated man went fly fishing. Everyone else on the boat laughed at him, but he persisted. When he finally caught a fish, he was determined to release it, no matter what. He writes:

A 15 Kilo (about 35-40 pound) shark had slid alongside the port side of the boat. Everyone was ecstatic, probably none more so than the boatman/captain. Now here is the tricky/interesting part. From out of nowhere the boatman appeared with a large gaff [a gaff is a short pole with a huge hook on the end, used for snagging fish and hauling them into a boat] (big enough to capture an elephant!). Knowing the local culture, I knew that if this wonderful adversary were to be boated it would wind up being served in someone's sharkfin soup. This is something that I did not wish to happen. Without much hesitation, I pulled my scissors to the leader and cut the magical beast free, much to the consternation of all aboard. Needless to say, I was a virtual outcast for the remainder of the day, but in myself I knew that I had just lived one of those few rare moments in ones [sic] fishing career. (Soule 3)

The fly fisherman clearly believes that catch and release is his moral duty. To him, as it is to many flyfishers, catch and release has left its intended incarnation as a necessary conservation measure and morphed into an integral part of fly fishing ethics. He doesn't question the morality of fighting a shark for twenty-five minutes before releasing it or "striking hard" several times to set the hook (meaning that he tried to yank the hook deeper into the fish's mouth by jerking upward with the rod tip), but everyone else

on the boat understood the hypocrisy of the situation (Soule 3).

Even animal rights activists tend not to view catch and release as a moral or humane alternative to killing and keeping caught fish. It might sound strange that environmentalists of any kind would oppose a policy with a record of helping fisheries. But their opposition is based on animal rights, not conservation. The well-known fisherman Peter Gibson describes the animal rights perspective on catch and release:

Ironically, catch and release, while a commendable conservation practice to ensure the sustainability and re-use of angling resources, is one of the things that the animal rights lobby hates most. We may as well call it 'catch, torture and release,' because while the animal rights lobby might not be totally opposed to catching and killing animals to eat, it certainly is opposed to catching them, irritating and hurting them, then releasing them so we can do it all again next weekend. (2)

This is a widespread feeling in the animal rights community. Even less extreme organizations than PETA, organizations that do not totally hate the idea of catching and eating fish, are opposed to catch and release for moral reasons. In a lecture about the morality of hunting, animal ethicist J.M. Bryant compares hunting with gladiatorial combat in ancient Rome. He believes that people who derive pleasure from hunting are just as cruel as Romans who enjoyed watching human beings tear into each other in the arena (Paterson 154). And that is just his position on a sport that provides food for the hunter. What would he think about a sport where human pleasure is the only purpose? He would not care that the fish would prefer to be caught and released rather than caught and kept. He would say that the fish have the right never to be

caught at all. Of course, PETA takes a far more radical stance. The organization describes trout living in streams under heavy fishing pressure as being “likely to spend their lives being repeatedly traumatized and injured” (“Fishing” 3). It attacks the idea of fishing for sport and accuse fishermen of inflicting cruelty on fish for their own enjoyment. Its solution is to “[n]ever buy or eat fish,” and to oppose all forms of sport fishing (“Fishing” 3). PETA might be radical, but its facts are hard to fight. Fish are repeatedly traumatized for the benefit of the angler. I have personally caught fish with hooks already in their mouths, meaning that they had been caught and released just a few days before being caught again by me. I have seen the damage done to the mouths of fish by catch-and-release anglers repeatedly stabbing them with hooks. And I have seen fish floating belly-up in a river because they were just improperly released by an angler upstream of me. Can I continue to do this with a clear conscience?

But all these ethicists, writers, and biologist who attack catch-and-release fishing are under the impression that I fly fish for fun, and for fun alone. They assume the only benefit I gain is some kind of cruel pleasure from the tormenting of the fish. Well, I have an honest defense. Fly fishing gives me far more than pleasure. When I said that it has enriched my life since the age of ten, I meant that it is more than just enjoyable.

Fly fishing has been one of my only forms of artistic expression for several years now. Instead of buying my own flies pre-made at a flyshop, I tie my own. And instead of using patterns of flies that have already been invented by some famous fly fisher, I capture insects from a creek or river, bring them to my fly tying bench, and copy them with whatever fur and feathers seem to match. My flies are my own creations, based off of nothing but what nature produces. When I catch a fish with one of my own fly

patterns, it gives me far more satisfaction than it would if I had used a pattern that I bought at a store. It shows that I have the skill and the knowledge to imitate the wings of a *Hexagenia limbata* or the tail and legs of a crayfish. This is an art that I cannot practice without fly fishing, because it is the fish that give me the feedback and the purpose of fly tying. Without fly fishing, fly tying would just be a strange form of arts and crafts.

Fly fishing also gives me a deeper connection with my close friends and family. It allows me to spend time with people whom I care about, away from all of the distractions and complications of modern living. Usually, my favorite parts of my fishing trips have nothing to do with me catching fish. Seeing my father's expression of shock when he discovered that he had accidentally hooked a twenty pound carp was far more enjoyable than when I caught a largemouth bass. Being out on the water for a day brings people closer together than one would believe possible.

But these arguments are still full of holes. I could "express myself artistically" without having to traumatize fish. I don't need a psychiatrist to tell me that I can spend quality time with friends and family without going fishing. Why could I not go on a hike or a bike ride? It would probably be healthier for me anyway.

However, there is something uniquely beneficial about fly fishing. One day of fishing allows me to reconnect with the wilderness on a deeper level than a lifetime of hiking. When I go fly fishing, I enter the ecosystem of the trout. I leave my own comfortable environment, I leave the world of air, and I leave my cozy spot at the top of the food chain. I become just another bug floating down a river. Fly fishing is the act of becoming that bug. When I tie my flies, when I cast, and when I try to drift the fly

naturally in the stream, I am doing all that I can to become part of the river. I need to convince a fish that some gunk tied around a piece of wire is a living, breathing being. It is beyond acting. It is real. The stream, the bugs around me, and the fish, who are now my predators, are all real. And when a fish is hooked, it fights for its life because it knows that the struggle is real. This is an experience that I can only have through fly fishing. Humans used to enter this life-and-death world every day, but back then, mastodons and saber-toothed tigers were the actors, not fish and bugs. It was a time when we were on the food chain, not when we dominated and manipulated it. Though my ancestors and I have long lost that contact with the natural world, I can return to that realm of predator and prey as a bug. I can finally become part of the natural world that I, as a human being, was designed to inhabit, but that I have lost to society and industry.

J. Claude Evans makes another good point in his book *With Respect for Nature*. He argues that catch and release is based on respect for fish and their ecosystems:

This respect is embodied in the constraints the intent to release the fish puts on the methods and tackle used (bait such as worms tends to be swallowed more deeply than artificial flies, increasing the danger of serious harm to the fish), in the brief moments of pleasure we take in the beauty of the fish before we release them, and in the exquisitely gentle handling of the fish before it is released. In such practices we gain a sense of the ways in which we can 'fit in with' the land. (220)

Catch-and-release fly fishing is not just supposed to be a way to catch fish. It is a way to rebuild the connections with nature that we severed long ago. And it helps us display

our respect for the natural world. Releasing a fish is not just kindness; it is a way of saying that I respect the fish so much that I feel unworthy to take its life. Fly fishing allows people to become a part of the environment, to live in the world as we were meant to. Nothing else allows us to do that. Not hunting, not fishing for food, and certainly not hiking. It is impossible to become a part of nature unless one truly leaves their privileged position of a 21st-century human and enters the world of fish and food, predators and prey.

This deep connection with nature is a strong argument for catch and release. But even though fly fishing is my last and only path into the natural world, I cannot morally justify it. Catch and release is, undeniably, sticking a hook into the lip of a fish for my own benefit. When I catch a fish and release it back into the wild, I have hurt it, terrified it, and exhausted it until it is nearly dead. And even though I can try to rationalize with deep philosophies about "becoming the bug," I will not deny that I fish because I enjoy it. I enjoy it when I play a large fish that puts up a real fight, even though I know that it is slowly being killed by lactic acid overwhelming its system. I enjoy lifting a fish out of the water and pulling a hook out of its mouth, even though I know that the fish squirms because it feels intense stress and pain. That enjoyment is cruel and wrong. I can only conclude that catch-and-release fly fishing cannot be moral. Even though I do not enjoy inflicting pain, I am willing to do so for my own enjoyment. There is nothing that can justify this action. No matter what the benefits are for me, it is basely wrong to hurt a living creature in this way. I inflict pain for pleasure, and there is no way to get around that fact.

So I have now come to the conclusion that fly fishing is immoral. It is wrong, and

even cruel, in every sense of the word. What will I do, you may ask? My answer is simple: I will not stop fly fishing. I will continue with the knowledge that what I enjoy is morally wrong and unjustifiable. How can I do this? To be honest, it is very easy. I am guilty of far more moral failures than my love of fly fishing. Today, I ate a hamburger made from cows that probably never saw a green pasture; I rode in a bus that contributes to the slow warming of the globe because it was the easy way to get around; and I used an unnecessarily large amount of electricity so that I could turn on appliances that I really did not need. Every day that I am on this earth, I slowly destroy it. And I destroy it with the full knowledge that it is dying and that I could, if I wanted to, fight its death. My carbon footprint is enormous, a mountain of trash can be attributed to my need for excessive material goods, and there are still no solar panels on my roof. I do more damage to the earth in one day of ordinary life than I will during a lifetime of fishing. I try to lessen my impact on the environment, but my very existence continues to bleed the planet. Each environmentalist, ethicist, and animal rights supporter who attacks my fishing contributes to this enormous problem himself or herself. We all unnecessarily damage the environment on a daily basis. I am not trying to justify my actions, since I know perfectly well that they are morally wrong and inexcusably inhumane. And I make no excuses. I will continue to fly fish because I enjoy it, even with the full knowledge of its cruelty. If, someday, I can reduce the damage that I do to the environment to the point that fly fishing actually factors into the equation, I might consider giving it up. Anyway, the rivers will probably be out of fish by then.

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