

IN DEFENCE OF THE FREEDOM TO FISH, SHOOT AND HUNT

PETER RICHARDS



On the July 31st 2001, the *Daily Mail* reported that the American-based animal rights group PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) is planning an anti-fishing campaign in Britain using a poster which depicts a dog with a fishing hook through its muzzle. The poster reads: "If you wouldn't do this to a dog, why do it to a fish?" The intention is to shock the public into believing that angling is a cruel sport. It is being suggested by this group that angling is an activity that is morally unacceptable and that it should be banned. Hollywood stars backing the £13 million campaign include Pamela Anderson, Kim Basinger and Alicia Silverstone.

THE LOVE OF THE CHASE

There was a time when fishing, and indeed shooting and hunting, were considered commendable activities. To demonstrate my point I quote the opening paragraph of the preface to *Sport with Gun and Rod in American Woods and Waters*, edited by Alfred M. Mayer and published in 1883.

The love of the chase is deeply imbedded in man's nature. During the untold centuries of his savage condition he followed it of necessity. We now revert to our primitive employment for our pleasure and recreation, pursuing with ardor, sports, which often involve much bodily fatigue and always require skill and training. An impulse, often irresistible it seems, leads man away from civilization, from its artificial pleasures and its mechanical life, to the forests, the fields, and the waters, where he may have that freedom and peace which civilization denies him. If this be not so, then why is it that the man of affairs as well as the man of leisure feels again the joy of his youth as he bids farewell to his office or his club, and seeks the solitude of the woods and the plains? He will meet there some old familiar face in a guide, or fellow-sportsman, and welcome it with the ardor of good-fellowship. He will undergo all sorts of bodily discomforts, — coarse food and rough bed, the wet and the cold, — and

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www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

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Peter Richards is a Hampshire businessman and occasional writer. He is a life member of the Rationalist Press Association, a member of the British Humanist Association, the Society for Individual Freedom and the Freedom Association as well as a bronze subscriber to the Libertarian Alliance.

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Director: Dr Chris R. Tame Editorial Director: Brian Micklethwait Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb



FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY



yet be happy, because for a spell he is free; in other words, he has, for the time, become a civilized savage. If, with gun and rod, he goes into the recesses of the great woods, and lives there for weeks or months, or mounts his horse and traverses the western plains and mountain passes, relying on his rifle for his subsistence, he is made to realize that there are many things to be learned outside of cities and away from his usual occupations. He will find food for philosophy in the behavior of his hunting companions; he will see who is manly and unselfish, who endowed with pluck and self-reliance; for three weeks' association with a friend in the wilderness will reveal more of his real character than a dozen years' with him amid the safe retreats and soothing comforts of civilized life. He will learn how few are the real wants of a happy life in the midst of uncivilized nature. His troubles, if he carried any with him, will vanish; time will seem as little value to him as to the savage, and like all true sportsmen and 'honest anglers' he will return to his home with a calmed spirit and a contented mind.¹

I intend to argue the case in favour of hunting, shooting and fishing and to explain why I think PETA is wrong and why I think the view expressed in that wonderful old book is still true.

BEAUTY AND TRUTH

A more recent defence of field sports comes from Lawrence Catlow in his *Confessions of a Shooting Fishing Man*, which I would like to share with you.

But as a shooter and fisher, I respond differently from my opponents to the chasm that separates us men from other animals. He thinks we should stand on our side and gaze across. I think we should leap across the chasm, taking with us our powers of thought and our sense of beauty and our guns and our fishing rods and, yes, our hunting horns. I think we should shoot the pheasant as it flies through the blue sky and the duck as it flights into the silent waters under the stars. I think we should catch and kill trout and bless the pure rivers that breed them; I think we should shoot and fish reverently (I keep using this word), revering the pheasant and the trout and the duck for what they are: beautiful, thoughtless, edible things that exist to reproduce their own kind and sustain other creatures in death.

I think this is right because it recognizes the truth about nature and about man's dependence on nature. In the last week I have associated field-sports with both beauty and truth. It follows from this association that they should be a joy for ever,

from which I conclude triumphantly that they must never be banned.²

SURVIVAL

My own defence of fishing and also shooting and hunting is divided into three parts, in which I discuss the following topics: survival, pain and freedom.

The first part of my argument concerns survival. Without man's ability to hunt, the human race would not have survived. We owe our very existence to hunting. According to Terence Dixon and Martin Lucas in *The Human Race*, a book based on the research collected for the major television series of the same name:

... the overwhelming evidence is that for more than 98% of its entire existence so far, Homo sapiens has relied on energetic hunting as a basic survival strategy.³

Hunting is natural to us. This is why we enjoy it. The primitive pleasure of hunting for food is an obvious aid to survival, just as the pleasure of sex encourages procreation.

When David Attenborough was asked, "Are hunters barbarians?" he replied:

Certainly not. I've lived with Amazon Indians, Australian Abos and African Bushmen, and know that hunting is in the human personality and undoubtedly thrilling.⁴

The joy of the art of hunting is natural to us, and has been necessary for us to reach our current evolutionary position. The question is, why continue with it, if it is no longer needed for survival? Modern civilization has only been in existence for a very short period of human history and could collapse very quickly if some natural global catastrophe were to occur. In this situation any retained hunting skills would come to the fore once again and perhaps be responsible for saving the human race. Apart from the obvious pleasure it gives its participants, there are also many other benefits of hunting, shooting and fishing and these include the provision of food, vermin control, environmental conservation and the provision of employment in associated business activities.

PAIN

PETA's key objection to angling is the apparent pain inflicted on the fish by means of a hook during an activity that is recreational and therefore unnecessary. Alternative pastimes, which do not cause pain to fish or any other animal, would be preferable in their view. I use the word *apparent* above deliberately, as I wish to discuss the subject of pain. There is an argument that suggests that fish do not experience any kind of pain. As A. H. Chayter wrote:

A great accumulation of instances in which fish seem to have shown an almost complete indifference to wounds or injuries that would cause extreme agony to warm-blooded animals, seems to establish as a fact that fish are comparatively insensible to pain.⁵

In the light of the above statement, it seems totally unreasonable to equate the effect of a hook in the mouth of a fish with that of one in the mouth of a dog, as PETA does. In my view there are two types of pain, conscious pain and unconscious pain. To explain what I mean I will give an example.

If I set up a video camera to record my movements whilst I am asleep, it is probable that at some point I will appear to suffer a discomfort, which is at the mild end of the pain scale but strong enough for me to need to move my body into a more comfortable position. When I awake and view the recording, I will have no recollection of any mild pain during the night. This then is an example of unconscious pain. If I then drop the video recorder on my toe and let out a yell, I think we can conclude that this would be an example of conscious pain.

My conclusion is that pain operates on two levels, conscious and unconscious, and that it is conscious pain we should be primarily concerned about when discussing morality. Conscious pain can only be experienced by a conscious being. A conscious being will be aware of its suffering and therefore be a victim of its pain.

THE INNER EYE

The question is which living things are conscious and which are not? Let's take the example of a single cell organism, the amoeba, which is classified as an animal and is made up of a mass of protoplasm containing a single nucleus. It feeds on small organisms that it ingests by surrounding them with pseudopodia, which are outflowing projections. The largest amoebae are no more than one fiftieth of an inch across (0.5 millimetre). If it is pricked with the end of a fine thread of glass, it will draw back and flow away. Zoologists describe this as irritability. I call this unconscious pain. I cannot believe that an amoeba knows it is alive or is aware of its suffering any more than it is contemplating the meaning of the universe.

Plants, although living things, are not generally considered to be conscious. Viruses and bacteria are not considered to be conscious either and attract no human sympathy. The welfare of spiders, worms, and flies are rarely the concern of animal rights activists. The problem gets more difficult as we move up the evolutionary scale of complexity. Birds attract a certain amount of human sympathy despite the fact that there is no evidence that they are self-conscious.

Mammals have more complex brains, which suggests the possibility of consciousness. They also sleep regularly so that when they are awake they appear to be conscious. But are they? We know of the concept of the unconscious mind and perhaps an animal could be capable of perception and reacting to that perception without being self-conscious. Scientists have proved that unconscious perception is possible in humans. The condition known as 'blindsight' (i.e. unconscious vision) demonstrates that.⁶

In his book *The Inner Eye* Nicholas Humphrey describes consciousness as follows:

It is as if I, like every other human being, possess a kind of 'inner eye', which looks in on my brain and tells me why and how I'm acting in the way I am — providing me with what amounts to a plain man's guide to my own mind.⁷

He also describes how an animal might exist without consciousness.

Imagine first the case of an animal that does not have an inner eye. It has sense organs, which monitor the outside world, limbs which allow it to operate in and on its environment, and at the center a sophisticated information-processor and decision maker. But it has no insight into anything which is happening inside its the brain. It is, in short, an unconscious Cartesian machine.⁸

But do any animals have consciousness? Nicholas Humphrey describes a test that has been tried with a whole range of different animals in order to identify the presence of consciousness.

This is the 'mirror-test', devised by Gordon Gallup to see whether animals have a sense of 'self'.⁹

Those that pass the test include an 18-month-old human infant, a chimpanzee, an orangutan and a beluga whale. Those that fail the test include a dog, a baboon and a cat.

Nicholas Humphrey explains:

It is not that a dog, or a baboon, is too stupid, or scatty, or uninterested in images to connect the mirror-image with itself: it is that they seem quite unable to grasp the concept of self. The strong implication is that these animals have no way of reflecting on their own states of mind, that they never think "I want this, I feel that," and *a fortiori* that they could never imagine "This is how I should feel if I were you."¹⁰

It is worth noting here that, on the May 2nd 2001, it was reported in the Press that researchers have discovered that two bottlenose dolphins at the New York Aquarium are capable of MSR (mirror-self-recognition).

There is no evidence to show that fish are self-conscious and therefore conscious of any pain, as indeed is also true of pheasants, rabbits and deer. I therefore consider the statement that angling is cruel to be invalid.

There is an argument for minimizing the unconscious pain of any creature whose survival as an individual or as a species is of benefit to humankind because by doing so we encourage it to thrive.

It is also certainly true that to maliciously inflict unconscious pain on a creature quite needlessly can be damaging to the human psyche. This is because we are programmed to project consciousness onto creatures where it probably does not exist and any ill treatment will offend our natural sympathy. However it is important to make the distinction between conscious and unconscious pain as the former is experienced by a conscious being and the latter is not.

FREEDOM

The third and most important point is one of freedom. For this I have chosen to go back to first principles and quote from John Stuart Mill's classic work *On Liberty* to clarify the application of the principles of freedom.

The maxims are, first that the individual is not accountable to society for his actions, in so far as these concern the interests of no person but himself. Advice, instruction, persuasion, and avoidance by other people if thought necessary by them for their own good, are the only measures by which society can justifiably express its dislike or disapprobation of his conduct. Secondly that for such actions as are prejudicial to the interests of others, the individual is accountable, and may be subjected either to social or legal punishment, if society is of opinion that the one or the other is requisite for its protection.¹¹

According to these maxims, it is perfectly reasonable for PETA to try and persuade people that angling is cruel, but if people like myself are not persuaded then no other legitimate action can be taken against us, for this is not required for the protection of society.

It is also true that there are reasons why angling and related outdoor sports are commendable. Apart from learning a skill, there is also the character building effect of learning self-reliance. The appreciation of what really matters in life, which is fostered by getting back to nature, is another. Despite suffering some bodily discomforts, the freedom and peace, which is experienced when we get right away from the hustle and bustle of city life, is very refreshing. The latter, in an age of telephones, computers and fax machines is surely even more relevant now than it was a hundred plus years ago. If we go away for a few days or more,

we have the opportunity to learn of the true character of those with whom we share our activities, as no doubt contestants of the recent TV show *Survivor* would testify to. When we finally return home we feel that our batteries have been recharged.

“THE SAME HIGH AND HAPPY THOUGHTS THAT POSSESS ME”

In conclusion, I can say that hunting has been a necessary part of the survival story of the human race throughout most of its history and may once again become so in the future. Hunting is natural to us and is indeed part of the human personality.

The claim made by ‘PETA’ that angling is cruel, I have argued, is not true, as fish are incapable of conscious pain, because as a species they are not self-conscious.

I believe that people should be free to do whatever they want to do, providing they don't interfere with the lives of others, and on these grounds should be allowed to continue to fish. By extension the argument can be used as a defence of hunting and shooting as well as fishing.

The virtues of hunting, shooting and fishing, as expressed in that charming old book *Sport with Gun and Rod* are in my view still true.

In the words of Isaak Walton I would like:

... to leave you possessed with the same high and happy thoughts that possess me of it; not only of the antiquity of angling, but that it deserves commendations; and that it is an art, and an art worthy the knowledge and practice of a wise man.¹²

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