

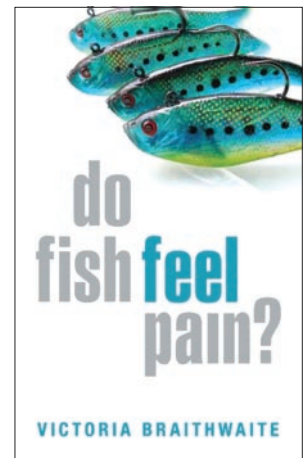


Do fish feel pain?

Victoria Braithwaite
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256 pp. \$29.95. ISBN: 978-0-199-55120-0 (hardcover).

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In the preface of her book, Victoria Braithwaite, with a humble vocabulary and an exquisite tone, accepts that she must look with open eyes at the recent controversy (for which she has been largely blamed) surrounding the subjects of fish awareness and intelligence and the possibility that fish experience pain.

Braithwaite's prose is transparent and clear, and from the beginning she states that her goal in writing this book is to provide the background to promote an informed discussion. This premise is recalled often – perhaps too often – throughout the book. The author successfully informs the reader of what is known at present about pain in fish using simple and clear language that nonexperts can easily understand. Furthermore, the book addresses whether it is meaningful to discuss fish welfare at all. Then she suggests that the reader should make up his or her own mind on this subject.

In raising the possibility that fish feel pain, Braithwaite stresses that pain is not a single process, but rather a series of events and characteristic responsive behaviors. The discussion might move the reader to question whether the experience of fish is at all equivalent to human pain. However, the author presents sufficient evidence that indicates that fish possess memory and a sense of self-awareness and feel real pain.

Braithwaite fluently and convincingly describes why the subject of fish pain and suffering has only been recently addressed

and acknowledges the paradox that our own existence is so inextricably tied to these “alien”-looking species. Moving from the position that the preponderance of the evidence demonstrates that fish do experience pain, she smoothly transitions to question what the implications are for the way in which we interact with them.

The recognition that fish have the capacity for pain perception has prompted many individuals to seek to offer fish appropriate protection. In a balanced way, scientific evidence is presented in this book that supports doubts about the welfare needs of fish. The book is far from an anti-fishing treatise; the author shows her own doubts on how to handle the issue of fish pain and suffering and states in a prudent way, “There is a worrying tendency at this point to rush solutions; until we know more, we should be cautious in what becomes recommended or lawful practice.”

What is presented in this book is not a simple story, and the descriptions of our modern interactions with fish reveal a complex cultural relationship. There is a tendency for fish to be part of visual displays in public places: restaurants, doctors' offices, hospital outpatient areas, and even in our own homes. The author asks if this is ethical. How do the fish get to the different displays? Are there different welfare concerns for fish that are wild caught compared with those reared in captivity? Little by little, Braithwaite moves the reader to concern about the many ways we interact with fish.

When the readers have easily gone through the first six chapters of the book, they find in the last chapter that if they have been convinced that fish feel pain, they are challenged to change the way they think about and interact with them. Many will struggle with this change of mind and action, since fish are perceived as different from birds and mammals, but the more deeply we think and consider recent scientific evidence, the more we recognize that we have to face an interesting debate on fish welfare.

In this last part of her book, the author pushes the reader to make a responsible decision concerning this topic, stating that “rational self-argued evidence, not intimidation, will be the way to make progress.” Braithwaite, however, does not dictate what this action should be, accepting that the way forward remains controversial and will require individual weighing of evidence and personal decisions.

This book is appropriate for a broad audience, from professional anglers to scientists to home fish pond owners. They will have fun reading it, and they will get excited, page by page, considering the fascinating insights into fish behavior and consciousness that they are gaining by reading this book. At the end, though, the reading might leave some with a sense of bitterness or self-doubt. Patricia Braithwaite forces you, if not to decide how to act, at least to think about what it means that fish feel pain.