

The rising tide of animal rights

Peter Gibson

Peter Gibson* argues that anglers can't afford to stick their heads in the sand any longer—there is a rising tide of animal rights lobbying that is opposed to recreational fishing. Lack of interest from the average angler and lack of cohesion amongst recreational fishing organisations will play into the hands of the animal rights movement.

It won't be long before recreational anglers have to face the biggest challenge in the sport's history in this country: fending off bans on recreational fishing based on animal rights concerns.

Most Australian anglers seem to be either totally ignorant of this possibility or blithely hoping the problem will just go away. Some say 'no government would ever allow it to happen', others seem to think they are only heading for a minor row with some vegetarians. Either way, they would be wrong, and they are missing a major point: the battle won't be between anglers and government, or anglers and another minority group—it will be a battle between anglers and the broader community. And it is a battle that anglers are extraordinarily ill-prepared and ill-equipped to fight. Most alarmingly, many anglers have a number of misconceptions about how animal rights will affect our sport.

The unexpected opponents

The first misconception is that the animal rights lobby is just a bunch of hippie fanatics that no one needs to take seriously. Nothing could be further from the truth. Worldwide, the animal rights lobby is well funded and highly organised. The larger organisations, such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) are professionally run, have huge operating budgets based on subscriptions, generous donations and bequests (and in some cases government assistance) and have the ear of governments all over the world. PETA has been around for twenty

five years, claims to have over 850,000 members worldwide and is very active in Australia. In 2005 it forced the wool industry to agree to abandon mulesing of sheep, when to the dismay of sections of the industry, it struck a deal with the Australian Wool Growers Association (AWGA) to phase out mulesing by 2010.

It is worth noting that in the mulesing argument, the key protagonists were initially the wool industry and PETA. PETA did not make the government regulators its main target—it took on the wool growers, and it engaged the support of the clothing manufacturing industry, fashion industry and the community. The wool growing industry finished up having to battle on several fronts: with PETA, with the fashion and clothing manufacturing industries and with community opinion. In the final stages, PETA managed to persuade one section of the wool industry (the AWGA) to strike an agreement with it—PETA effectively divided and conquered. Later two major wool industry groups, Australian Wool Innovation (AWI) and WoolProducers, flatly rejected the agreement between PETA and the AWGA, so PETA went back to its boycott campaign against Australian wool. But the agreement with AWGA still stands and PETA claims it will promote wool produced under that agreement.

At this stage PETA looks as though it has won the high ground: it has got part of the wool industry and much of the clothing and fashion industry onside, and most importantly it has garnered a lot of public support, which in turn, will influence retailers when they source their woollen goods.

In much the same way, animal rights lobbyists will focus on building community support for their arguments and anglers will end up having to argue their case not just with animal rights activists or governments, but could also face the daunting task of trying to turn adverse community opinion around in their favour.

Anglers can't dismiss organisations like PETA as irrelevant do-gooders. They have to admit the possibility that amongst the 850,000 members of PETA, there are intelligent, committed people, whose simple reason for joining PETA is that they just don't like to see animals suffer.

They feel that their viewpoints and motives are justifiable and well-intentioned, so PETA, and other animal rights organisations, and their members, demand respect and an intelligent dialogue.

It is also essential that anglers understand the basic principles of animal rights and how they differ from animal welfare.

Wikipedia's explanation of 'animal rights' is as good as any:

'Animal rights is the concept that all or some animals are entitled to possess their own lives; that animals are deserving of, or already possess, certain moral rights; and that some basic rights for animals ought to be enshrined in law. The animal-rights view rejects the concept that animals are merely capital goods or property intended for the benefit of humans. The concept is often confused with animal welfare, which is the philosophy that takes cruelty towards animals and animal suffering into account, but that does not necessarily assign specific moral rights to them.

'The animal-rights philosophy does not necessarily maintain that human and non-human animals are equal. For example, animal rights advocates do not call for voting rights for chickens. Some also would make a distinction between sentient or self-aware animals and lower life forms, with the belief that only sentient animals, or perhaps only animals who have a significant degree of self-awareness, should be afforded the right to possess their own lives and bodies, without regard to how they are valued by humans. Others would extend this right to all animals, even those without developed nervous systems or self-consciousness.

They maintain that any human or human institution that commodifies animals for the purposes of food, entertainment, cosmetics, clothing, scientific testing, or for any other reason, infringes upon their fundamental rights to possess themselves and to pursue their own ends.'

The futility of the pain argument

The second misconception is that arguments such as 'fish don't feel pain' will win the day. The stupidity of this argument is mind boggling. There will always be scientists who will be able to argue convincingly that fish do or don't feel pain. But anyone with an ounce of common sense would realise that if a fish couldn't feel fear, alarm and pain, it would be lacking the most basic instincts to ensure its own survival. And even if there was the remote likelihood of proving otherwise, what use would that be? I can't see any chance of a scientist convincing those 850,000 members of PETA not to worry about it.

Animal rights and conservation are not the same thing

The third misconception is to believe that we already have conservation practices in train that will answer the concerns of the animal rights lobby. For example, some anglers mistakenly think the worst that will happen is that 'catch and release' will become a standard practice. 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.

Germany has already banned catch and release recreational fishing. The ban is underpinned by the German Animal Welfare Act, the first principle of which states that 'No one may cause an animal pain, suffering or harm without good reason.'

Community attitudes can change

The fourth mistake is to think that community opinion will be on our side when the proverbial hits the fan. Don't count on it. There are plenty of cases of community attitudes quickly swinging against traditional practices, for example:

Duck hunting: in August 2005 the Queensland government announced a ban on duck and quail shooting. The announcement was remarkable for the fact that the main reasons given for the ban were connected with animal welfare, (that duck hunting is cruel and socially unacceptable), not the conservation issues given in previous similar bans in other States. The media release by the Queensland Minister for the Environment said there had been consistent concern from many citizens and that community attitudes had reached the stage where it really was time to ban duck and quail hunting. The press release even quoted one member of the public who wrote to the Minister: 'The idea that you can kill an animal for sport, recreation or tradition should be consigned to the dark ages'.

The live sheep export trade: we were once a nation of farmers, or if we weren't farmers, we were related to farmers. Most Australians are now urban dwellers who have never been on a farm, let alone seen a sheep killed. We once had few qualms about shipping livestock to foreign abattoirs, but these days many Australians, including farmers, no longer think it's acceptable and will argue that if another country wants our meat, the livestock should be slaughtered here without unnecessary suffering. PETA already has the live sheep export trade in its sights and I expect that we will see growing pressure against this practice over the next few years. PETA is likely to get a fair bit of support from the general public, which will probably prefer a least cruel option, i.e. carcass export.

Battery hens: consumers have voted with their wallets on this one. Years ago no one gave it a second thought, but now the supermarket shelves are full of free-

range and barn-laid eggs that people are actually prepared to pay more for. In my local supermarket, the battery hen eggs now take up less shelf space than the new chook-friendly brands. In an industry that competes mainly on lower prices, who would ever have thought that people would pay a lot more just to know a chook was happy?

Tail docking of dogs: NSW was one of the last States to fall into line on this issue in 2004. Long accepted by dog breeders and owners as aesthetically desirable and as a supposed way of preventing later injury to the animal, tail docking has been banned despite a long and hard fight by the breeders and their organisations. Vets cross Australia supported the ban, most dog owners either approve of it or have accepted it without any fuss, and in my experience as the owner of tail-docked dogs, the non-dog-owning general public seems to applaud it.

Each of the examples above would have been scoffed at twenty years ago. No one, not even the protagonists, would have expected the community to change tack so quickly and so decisively.

Community attitudes on perceptions of cruelty in angling could change just as fast, with surprisingly little prodding by the animal rights lobby.

Your local MP won't be much help

Anglers' fifth misconception is that we can depend on politicians to save our bacon.

I've often heard anglers say 'there's no way the government will restrict angling—there's too many anglers who vote'. But the power of the angling vote is a myth: political parties get elected because of economic management, health care, defence, education, industrial rights and so on. Fishing is not even on the list. It is possible that political parties will be elected that will be sympathetic with animal rights groups or are susceptible to their arguments.

In June 2005 a private members bill was introduced into the Australian Parliament by Senator Andrew Bartlett of the Democrats. Titled the 'National Animal Welfare Bill 2005', it stated that one of the

purposes of the Act would be following:

- ‘(b) provide standards for the care and use of animals that...
- (ii) prohibit the capture and killing of wild animals for the purpose of entertainment or sport;’

The bill was referred to a Senate committee for further consideration. If such a bill became legislation, it would effectively ban recreational fishing.

It remains to be seen how much support this bill gets from the major parties, but similar moves from the Democrats in the past have proven to be good indicators of where public opinion is heading: in March 1998 a Democrats Senate motion called for a ban on duck hunting. The motion was passed, and although it was unenforceable, several State and Territory governments later introduced legislation which banned duck hunting in the Australian Capital Territory, Queensland, New South Wales and Western Australia.

Lobbying your local politician to persuade him or her not to support anti-angling animal rights initiatives might not be very effective, because your local MP’s party either won’t be in power, will be more concerned about pandering to its inner-city powerbase or will be influenced by an animal rights lobby that is far more coherent and cohesive than the fractured, disorganised and underfunded recreational angling lobby.

What else will not be in our favour?

There will be several other influences and influencers on the debate. For example, the RSPCA, an organisation that has earned enormous respect in Australia, is opposed to animal cruelty, including cruelty to fish. Its official policies state:

‘Angling

‘RSPCA Australia does not oppose angling provided that all of the following conditions are met:

- it is conducted in a manner that minimises any associated pain, suffering or distress to the fish during capture and handling, and killing or release
- it is only conducted in waterways where free-running fish can escape
- the fish is either released immediately,

provided the hook injury is minimal and will not compromise survival, or humanely killed immediately by stunning, spiking or pithing.’

However the RSPCA’s official policy also states that ‘Fish and crustaceans are capable of experiencing pain and suffering, thus they must be accorded the same respect, consideration, compassion and care as that given to other animals.’

Animal welfare policies such as this are only a short step away from becoming animal rights policies.

Another issue that is building momentum is the growing concern amongst scientists and conservationists that commercial fishers are over-fishing marine fish stock such as blue fin tuna, swordfish, marlin, shark and cod. There is a risk that as this argument develops over the next five to ten years the public will become sceptical not only of the practices of commercial fishers, but that recreational fishers will be tarred with the same brush.

You don’t think that’s likely? Well, look at the anti-4WD debate in Australia. A child gets run over by a large 4WD and immediately there is an outcry for all 4WDs to be banned in cities, regardless of their size and shape, and ignoring the fact that research by motoring organisations show that the visibility from large 4WDs is no worse than many common sedans. However, such fine distinctions don’t count much in an argument incited by the daily newspapers and talkback radio. In the same way, the distinction between commercial and recreational fishing can be lost in a heated public debate, and recreational fishing could come out the loser.

Everyone will have an opinion

Once an issue starts to be aired, it is human nature for individuals to start thinking about where they stand on the matter. Take euthanasia for example: a few years ago people gave it little thought, but now, after the pros and cons have been discussed in the media, most people have decided whether they are for or against it. It’s not unusual for people to declare that they think that euthanasia is not much better than murder, or at the other end of the scale, that if the worst should happen, they would expect

their loved ones not to prolong their suffering. Few people have not decided what they think—personal views on such moral and ethical matters don't just dither to and fro. These are important matters, and most people try to come to some conclusion in their own mind as to where they stand. Perceived cruelty in fishing is just such an issue—the community will quickly come to a conclusion once opposing views are put before it.

What needs to be done?

When I discussed this issue recently with a few other anglers some of them were concerned that any airing of the matter, or any discussion within recreational fishing organisations, would only serve to bring the fight on sooner, before we are prepared. I disagree. We can't keep our heads in the sand thinking it will all go away.

Anglers need to start thinking about and talking about these issues, and angling organisations need to develop strategies and resources to match those of the animal rights lobby.

The first step in this process is for individual anglers to come to terms with their personal position on animal rights. My own thoughts on this matter are a good example of how complicated the whole problem is: why is it that I don't have a personal moral problem shooting a rabbit and then letting my pointer go and pick up the rabbit and bring it back to me—yet if someone was to even kick my dog, I'd be outraged. Is it because the rabbit is small? No, I also have canaries that I wouldn't hurt. Is it because there are a lot of rabbits? No, there are also a lot of sparrows, and I don't shoot them. Is it because the rabbit isn't very bright? Try telling that to someone who has ever kept one as a pet. Is it because I am going to eat the rabbit? No, I have plenty of other food at home. Is it because the rabbit is a pest? Well, at last, phew, there is a possible excuse, but even then, extreme animal rights people might say there are more humane ways to control their population.

The reasons why I am prepared to hunt one animal and not harm another are extraordinarily complicated, and my justifications, or excuses, are likely to be very different to yours.

Whatever our reasons are for fishing, anglers need to discuss them openly and weigh them against

the arguments of the animal rights movement. Anglers need to understand the motivations, philosophies and activities of animal rights campaigners, and also understand the animal rights and animal welfare legislation already in place and the processes that might cause it to be changed. Anglers need to sort through and discard supposedly pro-angling arguments such as 'fish don't feel pain' and concentrate on more robust defences.

Unfortunately, such discussions don't take place at all. Many anglers and fishing organisations seem to think that to discuss these issues is akin to kicking a sleeping dog. However it is anglers who are asleep—the animal rights lobby is wide awake and about to bite us.

Angling organisations need to have policies on animal rights and animal welfare and need to be well informed on animal rights. They need to make sure their policies aren't inadvertently playing into the hands of the animal rights lobby. For example, recreational anglers need to understand that the catch and release ethic is a resource conservation practice, not an animal rights or animal welfare measure.

Anglers should also start treating animal rights activists with some respect. On the whole they are decent, intelligent and well meaning people, most of whom have thought about these issues a good deal more than the average angler. Labelling them hippie fanatics won't help create a dialogue that might result in the understanding and tolerance we are going to need from the general community.

The role of the national angling body

Recfish, the national organisation that is meant to represent all Australian recreational anglers, needs to lead the way. There are some recreational angling issues that are so deeply rooted in State legislation that Recfish has little chance of making an impact, but this is one topic that has national significance and has not yet started carrying any State baggage. It will be an ideal area in which Recfish can prove its worth.

Angling organisations also need to help anglers communicate to the general community why we want to fish.

Why *do* we want to fish, and why *do* we think it's OK to kill fish for food and to catch and release fish for sport? The answers to that question are very complicated. When I showed an early draft of this article to a couple of other anglers, their first response was to send back to me a list of reasons why fishing is acceptable. This was missing the point. There are many reasons in my mind why we should be allowed to fish, and there are probably just as many in yours. Some will be the same, some will be different.

In articles and essays by many animal rights campaigners the writers don't ask 'why should anglers be allowed to fish?' but rather, 'why do anglers *think* they should be allowed to fish?'. This shows the depth of their convictions and their confidence that they have right on their side. And unfortunately there is not a set of incontrovertible reasons that will easily persuade anti-fishing lobbyists.

Nonetheless pro-fishing arguments are numerous, robust and valuable. Anglers need to understand them, agree about them and learn to communicate them. We've got to explain our position to others in the community, and hope that even if they don't think that way themselves, they will be prepared to let us keep fishing.

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