



OCEANS AWAY FROM HOME: THE SUFFERING OF FISH IN CAPTIVITY (2023)

Webpage: bornfreeusa.org/oceansaway

Type of Resource: Report, photographs, video footage.

Campaign Focus: Animals in Captivity.

Objectives: To discuss the lack of inherent value ascribed to fish compared to mammals kept in captivity, leading to less comprehensive understanding of fish welfare, biological and species-specific needs, complex neurology, and emotional abilities; and to emphasize the need to protect fish in captivity from cruelty, neglect, and wild population depletion for the reasons outlined above.

KEY FINDINGS

- Globally, it is estimated that more than 1 billion ornamental fish (freshwater and marine) from some 5,400 species are traded annually for the aquarium industry. Few of these species are regulated or protected in any way.
- Other than a couple exceptions, legislation in the U.S. does not protect fish in captivity from abuse, neglect, or animal cruelty.
- Despite 76.5% of AZA facilities keeping aquatic animals, they do not have minimum enclosure standards or sizes, welfare, or conservation requirements for captive fish. There are also no regulations for touch tanks, which pose a major human public health and safety risk from zoonotic disease transfer (some being potentially fatal).
- Aquarium tanks are many orders of magnitude smaller than even the smallest and most sedentary fish home range sizes in the wild, resulting in fish experiencing extremely poor health and welfare.

SUMMARY

Although fish are some of the most popular animals held captive in the world, they are some of the most overlooked and neglected species in terms of basic animal husbandry and welfare, with many cases that would normally be considered outright animal abuse for dogs and cats failing to translate the same outcomes or concerns for aquatic species.

To provide a multi-angled explanation for this great discrepancy in animal perception and thus perceived value to humans, this report overviews the harmful and mostly unregulated private trade of fish for ornamental purposes; corresponding wild population depletion; research confirming fish sentience, complex cognitive functions, meaningful social networks, and the experience of pain and suffering mimicking larger land mammals; unethical and inhumane practices of zoos and aquariums that keep fish, including touch tanks, which pose major public health and safety risks, and the unethical practice of cyanide fishing; and U.S. legislation pertaining to fish.

This report combines both desk-based research and first-hand investigations to reveal one of the greatest welfare inequities occurring in the present day, in plain sight, and at a shockingly widely accepted rate at institutions claiming to protect animal welfare and conservation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Implore zoos to ban touch tanks from aquariums, as they do not contribute to any genuine conservation efforts and directly negatively impact the welfare of the animals and humans involved.
- Urge zoos to immediately halt the wild capture of fish from their natural habitats to stock collections, thereby protecting wild populations and decreasing the use of harmful harvest practices like cyanide fishing.
- Advocate that fish are included in the definition of “animals” in both state and federal animal cruelty legislation based on the scientific evidence summarized in the report.

Get involved in Born Free USA’s campaigning and advocacy work. Visit our [Action Center](#) to take action on this and other important issues.