

Are Fish Intelligent? . . . or are Fishermen Stupid?

Jack Harford
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I love smallies, you should have seen the one that got away~JH

Fly Fishers through the ages have allotted great intelligence to fish in general and the harder it is to catch a fish the smarter it must be. However the question remains, “are the fish really smart or are the fishers dumb.”

Since few people are able to accept or admit that they are not intelligent (in some area) they tend rather to accredit great intelligence to the prey and grant themselves the title of “even more intelligent” when they happen to land a fish.

If one admits that a fish has but a pea sized brain and relatively simple cognitive skills, they must also recognize that, though humans have a grapefruit size brain and complex cognitive thought processes, we often remain quite stupid when it comes to thinking like a fish.

Some fishermen have interesting irrational thought patterns like:

“That looks like a nice spot I’ll fish here.”

“I think this is a beautiful fly, so I’m sure the fish will like it too.”

“Wow . . . That is a beautiful fly rod, if I have one of those I’ll bet I can catch a lot of fish with it.”

“I caught a fish.”

I would surmise that the only ones who have “caught” a fish with a rod and reel are the ones snagging fish in low water with a bare treble hook on the end of the line. In all other instances the fisher did NOT catch a fish; rather the fish caught the fly. Fly rods, no matter how beautiful or expensive do not catch fish; fish catch flies. It makes little difference if the fisher thinks his flies are beautiful; it only matters if the fish thinks the fly is food or is endangering their space.

There are many beautiful stretches of water that contain very few fish – the old 80/20 rule – 80% of the fish are in 20% of the water (or even 90/10).

What matters to the fish are three things:

Food – is there a source of nourishment

Shelter – am I safe here

Oxygen – can I breathe freely



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Fish are very sensitive to these three things . . . sometimes very sensitive. And maybe a fourth would be reproduction. They are very sensitive to their spawning time. The author's opinion is that these sensitivities are not so much learned through intelligence, but are the God given instincts that all fish are imbued with.

The fish have an instinctive ability to perceive if they are safe or on danger. They will avoid places and situations where they feel unsafe and gravitate to places where they feel safe and protected; we call these places structure.

The fish have an instinctive ability to sense how much dissolved oxygen in the water. If they cannot breathe freely they will look for a place where the water has greater oxygen content, like below a riffle, in colder water, or beneath waves. And fish instinctively know when they are hungry, what items are food, and maybe, and this may be a stretch, even which will give them the most protein for the effort it takes to catch that food. Sometimes when fishers say, "the fish are so smart today and won't take any of my flies," the fact of the matter may be that they are not feeding at that time of the day.

Since fishers are not fish, they do not instinctively think like a fish. If fishers believe the fish think like humans they fall into self-deception. Perhaps, if a fisher can get out of himself and begin to think like a fish (and each species has different instinctual characteristics) then maybe one can be lucky enough to offer a fly in such an enticing way that the fish cannot resist the urge to catch the fly.

Like the old-timers often say, "That's why we call it fishin' and not catchin'."

Good luck and tight lines,