



Banning the Retail Sale of Fishes



Fishes are often misunderstood, but they are sentient, complex beings who deserve respect and compassion. Banning the sale of fishes in pet stores is a crucial step toward preventing cruelty and preserving biodiversity.

Fishes Are Sentient and Feel Pain

“The extensive evidence of fish behavioural and cognitive sophistication and pain perception suggests that best practice would be to lend fish the same level of protection as any other vertebrate.” – Dr. Culum Brown, Macquarie University (Australia)¹

Fishes have historically been excluded from legal protection due to ignorance about their capacity to feel and think. Substantial empirical evidence shows that fishes experience emotions and pain in a way similar to vertebrates. Behaviors seen in nonhuman primates have been observed in fishes. For example, despite myths about “three-second memories,” fishes can recognize other fishes and solve puzzles.²

Cruel Confinement

Fishes are adapted to live in oceans and rivers. Aquariums don’t approach the diverse and vast habitats fishes enjoy in the wild. Instead of the sea, fishes are confined to the same few cubic feet of water for their entire lives.

Fishes Are Bred in Industrial Mills (Aquaculture)

Most freshwater fishes are bred in captivity, while most marine species are captured from the wild. The ornamental fish trade intensively breeds fishes in dirty, overfilled pools and tanks, resulting in high mortality and illness.

Some breeders inject fishes with fluorescent dye or alter their genetics to sell them at higher prices. Bubble-eye goldfishes are bred to have large sacs under each eye that cause partial blindness and make them vulnerable

to injury and infection. The sacs serve no purpose; they are just considered aesthetically pleasing. Bubble-eye goldfishes also have no dorsal fin, which causes them to swim abnormally.

Fishes Endure Extreme Cruelty During Shipping and in Pet Stores

The Animal Welfare Act excludes fishes, leaving them vulnerable to extreme cruelty. It is estimated that up to three out of every four fishes in the aquarium trade die during transportation due to stressors such as poor water quality, handling, confinement, and disease.³

Pet store employees have reported receiving shipments of dead fishes and crates of live fishes being left in the trash.⁴ PetSmart workers have shared that it’s common for large numbers of fishes to die from disease due to interconnected filtration systems.⁵

The Aquarium Trade Hurts Biodiversity

The aquarium trade is massive, as is its environmental impact. The true scope of the trade is unknown because there is no global monitoring system. It’s estimated that 1.5 billion fishes are sold annually in the global aquarium industry. The US is the largest importer of ornamental fish. The primary exporting countries of marine fishes are Indonesia, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka. Freshwater fishes primarily come from mills in Southeast Asia and Florida.⁶

The ornamental fish trade threatens vulnerable species and ecosystems due to practices such as cyanide fishing, dynamiting coral to stun fishes during capture, and inten-

sive fish removal. Cyanide kills roughly half of exposed animals (including non-targeted fishes) and blocks respiration in corals, causing bleaching and death.⁷ The Banggai cardinalfish is an example of intensive removal. Over the last three decades, the aquarium industry has captured millions of cardinalfishes from Indonesia. Their population has declined by up to 90%, and some local populations are extinct.⁸ In 2023, NOAA proposed banning their import and export.

The industry also relocates new species to ecosystems, sometimes with devastating consequences. Lionfishes live in the tropics of the South Pacific and Indian Ocean. The pet trade introduced them to the Atlantic Ocean where they destroy coral reefs and compete with native fishes across the Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico, and Caribbean.⁹ Their populations have increased dramatically over the last 15 years because aquarium owners continue to release them.

Betta Fishes

Betta fishes are among the most abused animals in the pet trade. Pet stores display betta fishes in tiny plastic



containers, sometimes stacked eight fishes high. These containers are a fraction of the size that betta fishes need. They also lack enrichment, filtration, and temperature control, resulting in many betta fishes dying on the store shelf.

Precedent

- Arlington, MA, became the first city to ban the retail sale of fish in 2024 (the ordinance also bans the sale of mammals, amphibians, reptiles, and birds).¹⁰

References

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- 8 Patrick Whittle. [US looks to ban imports, exports of a tropical fish threatened by aquarium trade](#). *AP*, August 16, 2023.
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