

Angling Ethics

by Tom Shervinskie

The boys were young, brothers of 9 and 11 years old.

They watched other anglers arrive and choose what seemed like predetermined locations around the pool. It was the opening day of trout season. A large pool just an hour earlier was now crowded with anglers, tackle boxes, bait containers and multiple pairs of hip boots at eye level. There was an air of anxiousness, a little intimidation, and sweaty palm excitement exchanged in their glances. Fortunately, their father provided a refuge as he placed two homemade maple-stained, wooden tackle boxes on either side of the boys that created an unspoken but easily recognized boundary, separating all three from the next group of anglers.



Someone somewhere in the mass of now raised and aimed fishing rods announced, "Eight o'clock." The tackle boxes protected the shoreline, but hip boots invaded the water in front of the boys. Hooked trout were splashing on the surface, flopping on the bank, and guided to nets. The brothers, however, were now relegated to observers instead

of anglers. At some point, the boys, led by their father, left the pool. Now, more unsure than ever, the boys asked if they could fish from a relatively open shoreline bordering a long, shallow riffle.

Each boy sported a 5-foot, solid fiberglass rod, anchored by an aging casting reel spooled with black nylon line. The riffle presented a new set of angling

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challenges. The hip boots were gone, but the shallow water offered plenty of snags. The younger brother hooked a trout. The black nylon line followed the fish downstream, the fiberglass rod arched in response, and each brother gathered as close to one fishing rod as was possible. Somehow in the excitement of the fight, the reel handle was turned in both directions. One brother held the dancing rod while the other tried to untangle the looped, black nylon from the reel. After a few minutes, the line went slack, but both brothers experienced the fish and excitement of the moment. The impression had been created, the lesson, even though humbling, learned. Trout fishing followed the brothers. It provided continued learning, offered escape to natural places, allowed the conscience to ponder life and how intertwined and reliant fish are of men and men are of fish.

As anglers, we all begin somewhere at some age and as important as the beginning is, the journey has the potential to influence our behavior, shape our values, and impose on our ethical considerations of how the game is played. Before 1900, Dr. James Henshall, a physician and angling author, suggested three stages of angler evolution. First, an angler desires to catch fish,

then an angler concentrates on catching trophy fish, and finally how fish are caught is more important than how many fish are captured. Dr. Henshall indicated that angling involved a learning process to achieve different skill levels. An angler may not ever progress through all three stages, preferring to concentrate on a particular skill to satisfy an angling experience. The importance of angling skill is debatable. What is important is that an angler realizes the underlying significance of angling.

Angling is more than skill, more than catching a limit of fish, more than a competitive fishing event. Angling is also a responsibility to respect the landowner who allows trespass, a responsibility of courtesy to other anglers, understanding and embracing the responsibility of stewardship and advocacy toward the environment, and a responsibility to share the knowledge and wisdom gained. These responsibilities form an angler's thought processes and behavior. Evolution of angling behavior is far more important than angling skill. An angler's behavior should not be dictated solely by fishing regulations but also by ethical considerations.

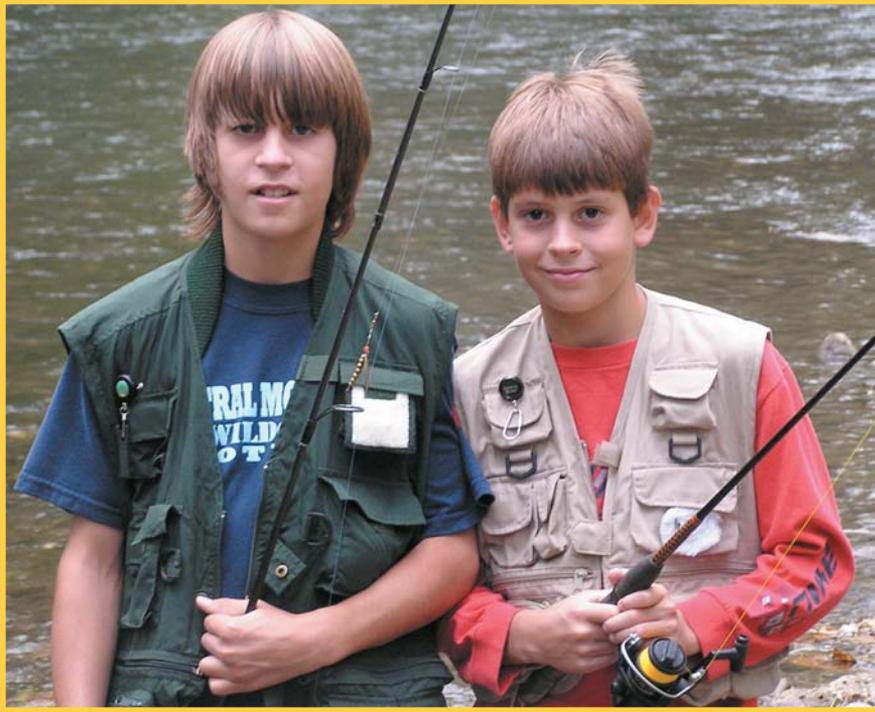
Before an angler ever steps into a stream or launches a boat, that angler must first realize that fishing in most Pennsylvania waters is a privilege, not a right. The word "privilege" cannot be taken for granted. Access to privately owned but publicly managed water is lost primarily because of unacceptable angler behavior. Asking permission and showing gratitude at the end of the angling day will create an atmosphere of cooperation between the landowner, the angler, and more importantly, the larger angling community. A simple gesture such as offering to maintain a litter-free area where you park or walk promotes goodwill and will undoubtedly benefit the angling community. By their very actions on the water, individual anglers have the ability to affect, positively or negatively, future fishing opportunities of anglers they will never meet.

Bait anglers, fly-fishing anglers, lure anglers, catch-and-release anglers, an-

glers intent on harvest, competition anglers. The common thread is "angler." Understanding that an individual angler prefers to fish with a specific type of gear or has a specific reason for fishing is not important as long as anglers can co-exist both on and off the water. A certain courtesy must be extended to every angler you meet. It is important to respect the fact that we share the water. Step around an angler fishing the pool you had your heart set on and move upstream or down to the next pool or run. Appreciate the fact that another angler has given you a chance to fish new or different water.

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Respect the fact that you can incorporate a variety of angling gear into any outing. One kind of gear does not fit all anglers, but that does not mean an angler fishing gear different from yours is less entitled to participate in the sport. Angling factions create separatist attitudes. Separatist attitudes never result in a united effort in the angling ranks. It is necessary for anglers to see the big picture. Fishing should be accomplished for the sake of fishing. Fishing is inherently simple. Huck Finn fished with a baited hook and a string tied around his toe while floating down the mighty Mississippi. Huck did not fish from a high-powered bass boat with seven rigged rods, three jumbo tackle boxes, a voice-controlled trolling motor, and a high-resolution, 32-color, 18-megapixel fish finder with GPS and video capability. Huck still managed to



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Anglers must also be stewards and advocates of the environment. The aquatic resource—water—is the environment necessary to sustain angling. Without clean water, fishing will become nothing more than a video game. Anglers wade through it, cast into it, watch it and sometimes fall into it. Fishing allows anglers to promote environmental awareness to the general public. As an individual angler, observing your surroundings will often lead to clues to why the fishing was good or not so good on a particular stream. Those observations can mean a few more fish on the next trip or play an important role in improving fishing or as a recreational resource when provided to resource professionals. When anglers unite, they can provide important input into the decision-making process that affects aquatic resources. State and federal agencies often work with groups and organizations interested in protecting and promoting clean water, and with the fish communities that provide the quality recreation that anglers seek.

In 1959, 16 anglers in Grayling, Michigan, founded Trout Unlimited. The mission of Trout Unlimited is to conserve, protect and restore North America's trout and salmon fisheries and their watersheds. The organization boasts 125,000 members nationwide. The Pennsylvania Federation of Sportsmen's Clubs is an umbrella organization dedicated to providing a statewide, united voice for the concerns of all sportsmen and conservationists, to ensure that their rights and interests are protected, and to protect and enhance the environment and our natural resources. These groups and many others are strong advocates for the protection and enhancement of aquatic resources not only in Pennsylvania but also on a national level. The efforts of their members are responsible for improved angling through projects on the water and in government offices.

So as anglers our responsibilities are far-reaching. Our positive, enthusiastic relationship with private landowners is critical. Landowners will respect anglers only if anglers take the initiative to respect landowners first. It is equally important for anglers to respect one another. An angler should maintain good stream manners regardless of the

situation around him. Environmental stewardship and advocacy are vital to the continuation of quality fishing experiences. The ability to observe and relay those observations far surpasses the skill necessary to catch fish. Without clean water, the most accomplished anglers will never reap the rewards of skill.

In the oft-cited *Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold states, "That land is a community is a basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics." Land and water are not separate components in the environment. Lakes, rivers and streams will ultimately reveal human-induced changes to the landscape. To the individual, Leopold indicates, "No important change in ethics was ever accomplished without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions."

The brothers continue to fish. Angling has allowed them to travel together and alone to many great places. They retired the fiberglass rods a long time ago as a reminder of the beginning. The journey now includes a new beginning for sons and daughters to experience the gratification of angling in their lives. ☐

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