

Aquatic Animal Welfare – Overarching Principles

In the context of Aquatic Sector of the Aquatic Animal Welfare Working Group under the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy (AAWS), only vertebrate finfish are considered Aquatic Animals; other aquatic vertebrates are considered under other Sectors of AAWS. **(Note 1)**

The approach taken with animal welfare to date within the Aquatic Animal sector has been to establish overarching Principles against which sub-sectors can build their specific best practice guidelines to achieve animal welfare. **(Note 2)**

The overall aim of the aquatic sector (fish that are farmed, being transported, kept in aquaria, captured from the wild both commercial and recreational, or in aquaria in restaurants) should be to minimise suffering within the constraint of practices inherent to that sub-sector. **(Note 3)**

Specific measures include:

1. For fish held in captivity, the key parameters (temperature, salinity, pH, dissolved oxygen, & metabolites) of the aquatic environment in which fish are maintained should be within the species' natural range of tolerance.
2. For fish held in captivity, the holding unit in which they are normally housed should provide
 - safety from predators,
 - refuge from environmental extremes beyond their natural range of tolerance,
 - appropriate space,
 - appropriate space and/or water flow to avoid chronic degradation of water quality parameters referred to in point 1 above. **(Note 4)**
3. For fish held in captivity the feed supplied should meet known nutritional requirements, and be distributed in a manner and frequency which avoids starvation for periods longer than the species natural range of tolerance.
4. For fish held in captivity, any visibly damaged or sick fish should be assessed and either treated appropriately or promptly removed for killing by humane means suitable for the species.
5. During any handling of live fish,
 - care should be taken to avoid any damage to the fish
 - for prolonged handling of fish out of water (e.g. health checks, vet treatment, artificial reproduction, etc), an anaesthetic appropriate for the species and frequent irrigation of skin and gills is essential
 - fish intended to remain alive should be returned to the water promptly.
6. Any fish selected for harvest should be killed as rapidly as possible, by humane means suitable for the species
7. For fish harvested from the wild timely handling from capture to death is essential to minimise suffering. **(Note 5)**
8. Capture methods should be designed to minimise the capture of unwanted fish.

Explanatory Notes

Note 1: The duty of care principles are couched within the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy under which these specific aquatic animal principles will be applied.

Note 2: As a code there is no legislative basis. Words such as 'must' hold no relevance. Animal Welfare legislation is the place for definitives and the code assists operators to meet those definitives through words such as 'should'.

Note 3: Suffering is inclusive of pain and other issues of animal welfare.

Note 4: This principle when read with principle 1 covers all aspects. The detail of parameters such as water flow, stocking density, behavioural aspects and space will be in the sub-sector code themselves depending on operational method and species.

Note 5: 'Capture' as defined in sub-sector codes.