MICHAEL W. FOX

In your hand and in mine
Is the hand of lizard and bear.
And in our eyes is the eye
Of snake, hawk and wolf.

The blueprints of all beings
Overlap and share the same
Intelligent imprint of God’s seal—
The double helix of DNA.

We are all of one creation.
Let not our diversity blind us
To this essential unity.

of medication, of spending great amounts of
time and money doing this does not add years
to anyone’s lifespan. When fish die, they
are replaced, and the process usually repeats
itself.

Fish are probably not better off in an
aquarium. In addition to disease, they are
often chased, bullied, and sometimes killed
by tankmates. Most fish are territorial and
are especially vicious when breeding. Many
fish simply cannot be kept unless they are
fed a diet of live food (goldfish, live­
bearing fish). At least 100 million goldfish
are raised annually to be fed to other fish.
One fourth of these usually die in dealers’
tanks (a fate better than being eaten by a
Piranha or Oscar). The problems for fish
begin long before they and up in the home
aquarium. Freshwater fish that are not pond
or tank raised are collected by natives of
various countries. They are taken to a boat,
sorted into plastic bags, and shipped to
holding areas until bagged again and trans­
ported by air to various wholesalers. They
are then shipped to retailers and finally, if
lucky, end up in the home aquarium. Great
numbers of fish die before they make it to
wholesalers, and many more before reaching
the retailer. Hundreds of fish are packed
into a single plastic bag, and many die from
stress of ammonia. Fish that have a lifespan
of ten to twenty years in their natural envi­
ronment usually die in captivity after a few
months or at best a few years. The novice
can kill an astonishing number of fish before
learning how to keep them alive. A local
store owner writes, “I have had so many peo­
ple come to the shop over the years that I
like to refer to as the Saturday fish murder­
ers.” These are people who hit six to seven
stores on a weekend and take home twenty bags
of assorted fish—all for a ten gallon
tank.[3]

An article in the Wall Street Journal,
“Pity the Pet Fish: It May Be Desired, but
It Isn’t Loved,” seems to capture the atti­
tude of many people who keep tropical
fish.[4] In that article, Michael McCarthy
points out that “the way fish are treated—or
not treated—makes them something more like
organic ornaments than pets. Dogs and cats
are members of the family; fish are luxuries
or hobbies.” Most people do not become at­
tached to fish nor consider fish as indivi­
dual animals with emotions and unique person­
alities. McCarthy contends that few people
care about the health of their fish. It is
usually cheaper to flush them down the toilet
than to medicate the aquarium. I know of no
law protecting fish from this fate. People
who want to get rid of fish either trade them
for other fish at a local shop, flush them,
throw them out in the snow, junk them in a
trash can, grind them in a garbage disposal,
etc. In spite of the fact that it is illegal
to dump tropical fish into rivers, some peo­
ple continue to do so. In a few cases this
has resulted in the demise of native fish
populations.

In an editorial for Tropical Fish Hobby­
ist, John Quinn disputes most of the views
expressed in the Wall Street Journal. Quinn
takes McCarthy’s major premise to be that
“all people who keep fishes regard them mere­
ly as casual ‘throwaway’ organic home decora­
tions or artifacts that have few or no re­
quirements and rights and thus can be dis­
posed of when one tires of them.”[5] McCar­
thy, however, does not say “all.” I assume
that he means “most” people, but it is not
clear whether “most people” would include
hobbyists or those not regarded as hobbyists.
The dispute in this case could be settled
with a definition of “hobbyist.” I have not
found a definition of this term in the liter­
ature. From the use of the term in aquatic
magazines and texts, I would assume that a
hobbyist is an experienced aquarist, a person
who cares about fish and does not keep them
as organic ornaments.

Gunther Sterba, author of The Aquarist’s
Encyclopedia, considers anyone who keeps fish
a hobbyist, yet he does think it is important
to distinguish a serious hobbyist from those