Do fish feel pain?

Fish are fish - not humans or mammals, they live in a completely different physical and mental world. Yet there are still groups claiming that fish feel pain and experience fear when they are angled. An OFAH analysis of the literature on this topic found a recent scientific review which exposes the deficiencies and misinterpretations of claims that fish feel pain.

The review found that studies claiming to have found that “fish feel pain” have failed to do so, often because the studies were unable to distinguish between unconscious detection of noxious stimuli (technically known as “nociception”) and conscious pain. Understanding the terminology and difference between the two, is the first critical step in addressing this issue:

**Nociception:** the unconscious sensory detection of injurious stimuli

**Pain:** an unpleasant sensory emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage; pain is always subjective; pain can be reported in the absence of tissue damage and the definition of pain should avoid tying pain to an external eliciting stimulus (according to the International Association for the Study of Pain)

Pain is a result of specific patterns of activity in certain well-studied regions of the brain (the cerebral cortex). Pain is not felt at the level of sensory receptors, peripheral nerves, or pathways within the spinal cord or brain. The fish brain does not contain a true cerebral cortex.
Please use this information as a tool, if and when confronted by anti-fishing activists claiming fish experience pain from angling. Fish are a natural and renewable resource in Ontario, and overall populations are well managed and remain quite healthy. They can be used for wholesome and healthy food or for catch and release fishing by anglers without inflicting pain. Fish should not in any way be compared to or be given human characteristics. The way we treat and manage fish should be based on respect for them as fish. Sound science, realities and objective views on their well-being should inform management, not human emotion or feelings.

Research cited: