Recent studies on cognition, emotional states and nociception have suggested that fish are sentient beings. However, surveys about public perceptions on fish sentience and welfare are scarce. Additionally, humane slaughter regulations in most countries do not include fish, as is the case in Brazil and Colombia. This study aimed to assess the perception of Brazilian and Colombian citizens in relation to sentience, welfare and humane slaughter in fish. An online survey was distributed to the population of Bogotá, Bogotá D.C., Colombia, and Curitiba, Paraná, Southern Brazil. We received responses of 782 respondents, 395 from Bogotá and 387 from Curitiba. The survey consisted of questions on demographics and people perception regarding sentience, slaughter methods and different practices involving fish. Comparisons were made using Mann-Whitney and chi-square tests; the calculated error was 5%. Results showed that 75.8% (593/782) of respondents believe fish are sentient animals. The participants were asked about the level of sentience in eleven different species, on a 5 point-scale. The descending order in perception of sentience was human baby (87.6%), dog (78.5%), wolf (65.7%), cattle (58.6%), sheep (56.5%), mouse (45.4%), hen (43.7%), pigeon (40.1%), fish (33.5%), butterfly (17.6%) and cockroach (14.9%). Results seem related to the level of human affinity to each species. Furthermore, a higher perception of sentience regarding mammals may be associated with phylogenetic proximity. In general, women’s perception on sentience was higher for all species (p<0.01). A high level of fish suffering was perceived in some practices and killing methods. Amongst all participants, 18.4% (144/782) found catch-and-release recreational angling acceptable; being 29.4% (87/296) amongst men and 13.8% (67/486) amongst women (p<0.01). Likewise, 74% (579/782) of respondents perceived high level of suffering in the catch-and-release angling. Slaughter methods cited as most commonly observed were asphyxia (84.6%) (662/782), decapitation (49.2%) (385/782), percussion (35.3%) (276/782), gutting (33.6%) (263/782) and transportation of live fish in dry plastic bags, characterizing slow death by asphyxiation (11.0%) (86/782). Most respondents (92.3%) (722/782) pointed out that these methods of slaughter cause suffering in fish. Forty-three percent (344/782) of respondents have heard the term humane slaughter, with varying percentages according to different levels of education (p<0.01). Even then, 75.3% (589/782) of respondents considered that fish should be included in humane slaughter regulations. In conclusion, the perception of fish sentience and welfare issues in citizens from two Latin American cities supports changes in the way these animals are treated, including proactive steps to improve legislation.

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