

the fish porn commandments

The meaning of life - what the fuck is it, the answer to this timeless question? For most, it's a numbers game. For a commander, the number of battles he's won or the litany of assholes he's slaughtered, stabbed, shot, and killed. For a mother, the number of children she's birthed, nurtured, and transformed into successful adults. For a typical status-seeking American, the quality and quantity of ultimately burdensome possessions he or she owns: house, car, clothes, technological gadgets. When all these fuckers lie on their deathbeds with but a few remaining breaths, seconds from evaporating into the vacuum of death, these are the items, the accomplishments of life, to be plastered on their tombstones.

And for me? For this psychologically fractured, middle-aged, misanthropic, debt-addled, white-trash, fish-catching hermit? Why, *it's the number of fish species caught as shown in fucking photographs*. My epitaph shall be adorned with lovely shots of my dumb ass hoisting as many California fishes as possible caught in as many conditions possible - that, ladies and gentlemen, will be the legacy I leave.

A trail of *fish pictures* - fish porn - as life's work - how fuckin' *weird*.

But frighteningly more common than one would think.

Ya see, my obsessive focus on fish photos is really but a knot in a long string of the successful hunt's visual *documentation* that winds back through history to the time of mammoths, of ice sheets, of *Homo neanderthalensis*, of the genesis of human consciousness. CroMagnons over 30,000 years ago painted their mammal prey on cave walls. An ancient Native American intricately carved a mammoth or mastodon - heavily hunted animals at the time - on, fittingly, a big-ass mammoth/mastodon bone. The Assyrians minutely detailed their king's lion hunt for display in magnificent Mesopotamian palaces. Myriad are the hunters and fishers of endless cultures that tote a memento of a successful hunt: the antlers on the wall, the feather of the bird, and, today, the photo hangin' on the wall or adorning the computer background. Whether such effort blown on representing the hunted animal serves more as a ritual for placating the vengeful soul departed from the killed prey, or serves more as a stratification tool for actualizing the inherent biological doctrine of pecking orders by displaying a hunter's prowess (yeah, I know, that's a lot to chew on), squaring off on either side affects not one whit the fact that there's a long fucking tradition of documenting a successful hunt that reaches back well beyond history.

For me, this documentation, this trite fucking fish porn, this seemingly over-inflated focus on successfully hooked and landed fish by me captured in a still image, is especially important. Man, I'm just not part of this fucking world, trying to find my place in mainstream America via the typical identifiers - house, kids, work accomplishments - is a meaningless exercise since I *have* no place in the mainstream - I exist in a lone tributary, just faintly ebbing and flooding into the main flow. Consequently, my identity's far more derived on how well I can actualize that hunter's impetus on the water. Additionally, fish, fishing, has been the strongest thread in my life, nearly my only source of continuity, the reference point from which I feel my way through this often-bewildering world - the fish porn's the tangible signposts of that gossamer thread. Reminds me who I've been, who I am, and where I'm headed. And lest we forget: my misanthropy partially substitutes Nature, of which fish are a big part, for humanity, for society, and so the fish porn serves as a vicarious, nostalgic interaction that, in part, sates that omnipresent human need that even I have for connection with other life.

Simply - the fish porn reflects *me*, it reflects my progression, my relationships, my whole goddamn life, so it'd be fucking self-disrespect and disrespect to the fish to document the successful hunt with a shitty fucking picture. My twisted legacy and I deserve good shots since I've put so much work and thought and emotion into this relationship. The fish I chase and torture and kill and/or magnanimously release, they absolutely deserve the best shot possible that captures their beauty, their life, and prolongs it, at least vicariously, beyond their lifespan. Seems a necessary equalization when I cut such lives short. And, given the ridiculously high proportion of awful fucking fish porn infesting the Internet, commensurate with the increase in cameras in smart-phones, the wider community of humanity desperately needs to kick down some respect to the fish via some simple guidelines on how to take at least a halfway-decent shot of a fish.

This shall be the article to illuminate those rules and hopefully beat some sense into those ignorant fisherpeople's heads.

Now before I bequeath to you the Holy Rules of Good Fish Porn, I have to cite my sources. For more years than I'd like to admit, I, too, took awful fish pictures until I became friendly with a fabulous artist, Amber Manfree. I learned, by her explicit teaching and by subconscious osmosis, some of the rudiments of good photo-taking - composition mainly, such as not putting a person's head at the center of the frame and thus having shit-tons of dead space in the upper half of the image. Breining and Sternberg (1990) contains a section on fish photography that's surprising succinct and effective. Although I loathe the format despite this article being one, I have to admit that several listicles that basically distill the rudiments of good general photography have informed my picture-taking, Clarke (2014) especially (see the bibliography for more). But for the rest of the delicious tips I'm gonna throw your way? I'm sure someone's exhaustively found, developed, refined, and explained these general principles, but I don't know who they are, so fuck 'em - I'll take credit for 'em being *mine*.

And with that, behold - the Fish Porn Commandments!

COMMANDMENT ONE: *Thy Fish is Thy Subject!*

Look, if you take a shot of a fish, show it to someone, and they say, "Wow, what a background," your fish shot sucks fucking ass. A fish porn shot should be *exactly* that - a FISH shot. It's the subject - not the fucking rolling hills in the background, not the cottony clouds floating through an azure sky, not the jackass holding the fish, not the goddamn boat clutter diverting the eye from the fish - THE FUCKING FISH! Everything other than the fish is a distant second. Consequently, the goal of a fish porn shot should always be to accentuate the fish. How to do that? Follow these subcommandments:

1. **Fill the frame with the fish.** Generally, if holding the fish vertically, you should shoot it with a portrait orientation. If holding the fish horizontally, landscape it. And, for Christ's sake, get close to the fish - only if the fish is a big motherfucker should you be further away than five feet or so.
2. **Hold the fish away from your body.** This does NOT mean to straight-arm the fish - such a shot just looks really grotesque and implies that the fisherman's ego is *really* weak and that he needs to make the fish look as big as possible. However, holding the fish in the same plane as one's body creates a flat image - the fish doesn't pop. Best is to have the fish extended from the body toward the camera but with the elbows still bent - trust me on this.

3. **The background should be SIMPLE.** Boat clutter, people in the background, excessively complex backgrounds draw the eye away from the fish, which is the polar opposite of the goal of a good fish pic. A background of just waving tules, the waterway, or out-of-focus green forest - AND NOTHING ELSE - will retain the fish as the primary subject.
4. **Get the dirt off the fish.** Taking a shot of a fish with dirt and mud and fucking tule debris all over it takes away from the subject - the FISH - by obscuring part of the subject - THE FISH. In a similar vein, the shoe/tape measure/beer can with the fish to show the fish's size is just for weak-ass egos and turns the visual celebration of a successful hunt into a shitty Budweiser or Nike ad, inserting civilization into what's supposed to be a primitive expression.
5. **All parts of the fish should be visible in the photo.** For just a good, general fish shot, you want as much as the fish as possible visible - the tail, the pelvic fins, the head, everything. The hands are the biggest offenders here - too often, and this occurs most frequently with novices, the hands obscure part of the fish, particularly the all-important head. Additionally, unless you're a real pro at fish porn, you want ALL of the fish in the frame - cutting off the tail or pelvic fins or part of the body makes it all too easy for the eye to wander to other objects in the picture.
6. **Focus on the fish's eye.** Why? Focusing on the eye immediately draws the *viewer's* eye to the *fish's* eye - what deeper connection between a subject and a human viewer could you get? A fuck-up I see all the time is focusing on the eyes of the jackass holding the fish, with the consequence being that the fish, and especially the fish's eye, is out of focus, and that ain't the point - the FISH is the point. Similarly...
7. **Angle the fish headfirst toward the camera.** When combined with focusing on the fish's eye, this accentuates the connection between fish and viewer even more.
8. **The fish's head should be towards the sun** if the sun's out. This highlights the head, once more drawing the viewer to the fish's eye before anything else.

COMMANDMENT TWO: *Dead Fish Equalith Dead Pictures*

In general, taking shots of a pile of dead, stiff, bloody, discolored fish makes the fisherperson look like a fucking mongoloid, meat-slaughtering buffoon - makes it look like the fisher has no respect for the prey. Similarly, shots of fish just taken from a cooler in the backyard looks domestic, and capturing modern civilization in a fish-porn shot is just hypocrisy. There are exceptions - [see here \(image 47\)](#) - but only a real photo-taking bad-ass can get good shots with dead fish.

COMMANDMENT THREE: *Blatant Labels Debaseith the Fish*

Like Commandment One, a test for this is what first dumps out of a viewer's mouth. For example, if someone first says, "Wow, nice hat," when checking out a fish shot, that fish shot sucks fucking ass. Blatant positioning of product logos fucking *murder* a fish-porn shot - in fact, to me, such positioning totally transforms the photo from capturing the realization of an atavistic pursuit to a lowly fucking advertisement, no matter how awesome all other aspects are. It cheapens the fish, the experience, the art, everything. [These motherfuckers](#) are the worst - great photography equipment, stunning environment, gorgeous fish, and they so often fucking debase

it all by festooning the image with product logos. Yeah, I know, some people make a living that way, but pimps gotta live, too, and pimping's kinda fucked up (though Iceberg Slim was a killer writer).

COMMANDMENT FOUR: *Angleith*

Angles so often can highlight the fish as the main subject even more via the following subcommandments:

1. **Angle the fish to get the best light.** If, for example, you have a fish such as a bass or salmon that can be lipped or tailed and the sun's about midway between the horizon and at its apex, then angling the fish at 45 degrees (*i.e.*, perpendicular to the sun) will give the most even light. If shooting at night with a fish that burns out really bad - suckers and crappie are especially notable examples - angling the fish relative to the lens will likewise result in more even light.
2. **Get above or below your subject - the fish!** This is a common photographic principle that applies to fish porn - getting above or below the subject provides more depth and results in less flat shots.

COMMANDMENT FIVE: *C-and-R'd Fish Shall Lookith Likeith They're Going to Liveth*

Look, motherfucker, if you're going to post a fish pic somewhere and tell everyone you released it, then you should probably hold it such that you're not fucking injuring it to the point where it'll probably die when you unceremoniously dump the poor fish back into the water. Some examples:

1. **Don't fucking lever-grip lipped fish.** Holding a fish horizontally while lipping it with just the lipping hand all too often results in broken jaws and hence greater mortality rates - bass guys are the biggest criminals here.
2. **Don't fucking gill fish.** I would think this would be a total no-brainer given how fragile the operculae are and how thin the gill membranes are, and yet, especially with reservoir-trout guys, I see dipshits all the time fucking elbow deep in a big brownie's or laker's gills with "released" displayed prominently in the caption.
3. **Don't fucking pose a big fish with undersized gear.** You wanna catch white sturgeon with fuckin' bass gear then pose in a shot with both, documenting your fish-fighting prowess, and then say that you released it to "fight another day"? Fine, but don't get all pissy when someone tells you that you probably just released a fish to die since overextended playing time is one of THE biggest factors increasing mortality rate of C-and-R'd fish.

COMMANDMENT SIX: *Useith the Rule of Thirds*

This is one of the most touted principles in photography, and it works for fish porn, too, mainly by filling the frame with the fish (*e.g.*, setting the eye in the lower-right crosshair and the tail in the lower-left cross hair often puts the fisherman's head inline with the upper horizontal line - results in good balance).

COMMANDMENT SEVEN: *Mitigatith the Fuckingith Hat Shade*

When the sun's out and high, hat shade on the secondary subject - the jackass holding the fish - is distracting, especially when sunglasses aren't worn. The mind's eye wants and expects to see the fisherman's eyes, but hat shade turns the human's eyes into a black hole, which is fucking weird and fucking distracts attention away from the *primary* subject - the fish! If said jackass refuses to doff the hat, sunglasses are better since the mind's eye then *expects* to see an abyss below the hat and the human then becomes less distracting. Fill flash helps, but you gotta be careful if the fish is a species prone to burn out (*e.g.*, squawfish, steelhead).

COMMANDMENT EIGHT: *Don't Shoot it to Crop it*

A routine rookie mistake is assuming that shitty photography at the moment the shot's taken can be corrected back at home - "just crop it" is a line I hear all too frequently. However, if the subject - the fish - is ever so slightly out of focus though pretty damn close to being sharp while the composition sucks ass and so the image needs to be cropped, the cropping will make the subject - the fish - more out of focus because the depth of field decreases. Many professional photographers will tell you that if you need a lot of post-processing time to improve an image, the image sucked ass to begin with. Better to get it right the *first* time, the time when *taking the picture*.

So to enter the pearly gates...

For the sake of the memory of the fish, for the spirit of the fish (if you believe in that kind of thing), for contributing to the romantic, lost war of trying to stem the escalating flood tide of fucking domesticated, cheap noise infesting the Internet, please - stick to the above commandments when a camera's in hand and a fish is in front of it. Anthropology and evolution will both be better for it.

REFERENCES

- Breining, G., and D. Sternberg. 1990. Fishing tips and tricks. USA, Cy DeCosse.
- Clark, K. M. 2009. 8 incredible tips for shooting in full sun. Available: <http://mcpactions.com/2009/08/13/8-incredible-tips-for-shooting-in-full-sun/>
- Clarke, L. 2014. 40 tips to take better photos. Available: <http://petapixel.com/2014/01/24/40-tips-take-better-photos/>
- Meyer, J. 2012. 10 rules of photo composition and why they work. Available: <http://www.digitalcameraworld.com/2012/04/12/10-rules-of-photo-composition-and-why-they-work/>