

## Izaak Walton and *The Compleat Angler*



Izaak Walton and his scholar,  
woodcut by Louis Rhead, Wikipedia

“God did never make a more calm, quiet, innocent recreation than angling,” wrote Izaak Walton in *The Compleat Angler*, published in 1676. Though written in the archaic English of the mid 1600’s, *The Compleat Angler* remains one of the most reprinted books in the English language.

The book opens to three men meeting on a road who stop and compare their chosen sports – Aucepts the falconer, Venator the hunter, and Piscator the fisherman (a fictionalized version of Izaak Walton). The falconer goes on his way but the fisherman begins to mentor the hunter in the art of fishing and appreciation of the natural world around them. By the end of the book, Venator the hunter declares, “I have only lived since I turned Angler and not before.”

A new edition of *The Compleat Angler* was released in 2014 by Oxford University Press). The edition's editor, Professor Marjorie Swann, shared her thoughts on the book with the Izaak Walton League, namesake of the author and one of America’s oldest conservation organizations. Among Swann’s observations on the book’s enduring legacy:

There were many fishing manuals published before Izaak Walton wrote *The Compleat Angler*, and indeed he draws on many of these earlier works. What sets *The Compleat Angler* apart from these previous how-to books is Walton’s insistence that there is more to being an angler than a technical knowledge of bait and tackle. For Walton, fishing is at once an environmental, social, and spiritual experience.

Walton’s depiction of ordinary people banding together because they love outdoor recreation provides an inspiring model for present-day environmentalists. When Walton first published *The Compleat Angler* in 1653, England lay ruined by years of civil war, Walton’s beloved Anglican Church was abolished, his king executed, and the English landscape devastated by warfare. Walton’s anglers respond to this crisis by creating a new kind of society, the “Brotherhood of the Angle”, that had no ties to government or organized religion, but instead rooted its identity and activities in its members’ shared appreciation for the natural world.

**Angling was a popular 1600s pastime that had a number of guides written about it. “Angle” was an old English word for “hook.”**

Izaak Walton League points out that in today’s world, when we are told by policy-makers that environmental issues need to take a back seat to economic or political realities, Walton reminds us that bold visionaries not only can, but should, put the environment front and center during tough times.

### Sources

Izaak Walton League of America. <https://www.iwla.org/about-us/history-mission/the-compleat-angler>

This Obscure Fishing Book is One of the Most Reprinted English Books Ever. August 9, 2017. Smithsonian.com at <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/obscure-fishing-book-one-most-reprinted-english-books-ever-180964320/>