

It's spring, should I start feeding my fish?

It's February in the Okanagan and temperatures have been hovering between 2 and 10 degrees Celsius for almost two weeks now. All the ice is off the ponds and the fish are hovering near the surface. I am getting phone calls from customers who want to know if it's ok to start feeding their fish.

This is what I tell them: The fish are temporarily waking out of their winter torpor state (a sort of fish hibernation where their metabolism slows right down, but they are still capable of short burst of movement to avoid predators). During the warmest part of the day the surface water may warm up to 5 or 6 or even 7 degrees, but it cools off at night and the water is still cold and closer to the 4-degree winter conditions. Now, there are three main considerations.



The fish may (or not) gulp down a pellet or two, but the enzymes in their digestive system don't work well at those temperatures. Remember that fish are cold blooded and their body temperature more or less matches that of the water. In nature, they might graze a little on bits of algae that grows on the sides of the pond, but that this is quite different from swallowing pellets of dry concentrated food. The danger here is that the food will rot in their gut and cause damage their digestive system.

Another factor to consider is that the beneficial microbes that neutralize the harmful ammonia in the pond don't work at those temperatures, and consequently, there tends to be a build-up of ammonia during winter. The addition of protein food to the ecosystem will only make that worse, whether or not that food is consumed by the fish, or if it just sits there, rotting in the pond.

Finally, it's good to remember that the weather is rather unpredictable, especially these days of rapid climate change. I am not a pessimist, but even though we live in the Okanagan, this is still the middle of February in Canada. So, not to compete with Environment Canada, but I think that it is wise to expect a couple more cold snaps before the winter is over.

So, to answer to the question: No, you should not feed your fish for some time yet. Wait for the water temperature to stabilize above 10 degrees Celsius. There is no need to feel guilty about the "poor fish who have not eaten for so long"; it is better not to disrupt their fast, yet. When that time comes, however, consider starting with small amounts of easily digestible wheat germ food.