DISSECTION

Dissection should be used infrequently. Many of us had lots of dissection in our high school and college courses so continue to use it as a primary mode of lab instruction. It is very useful to see what the insides of a few things look like in terms of understanding them and ourselves, but cutting up dead things is a very minor part of modern biology. This curriculum included one dissection at the insistence of the consulting teachers. Use the fish effectively. Have students work in groups, not pairs.

The best source of fish are absolutely fresh (or fresh frozen) ones from a fisherman or woman you know. It is better to freeze fish, even for a few days, than to keep them on ice. The guts go downhill fast. Fresh fish from the grocery store are next best, though they may not be in very good condition inside. Check the insides of one before you buy. Last choice is preserved fish. The preservative can be somewhat toxic.

A common misconception about dissection is that a scalpel or razor blade is needed. Neither of these items should be used by elementary or middle school students. All that is needed to dissect is a pair of scissors and some wooden probes such as coffee stirrers. A pair of tweezers is useful. The critical thing is to have the correct scissors: surgical scissors with one sharp point and one rounded point. The sharp point is used to put a small hole in the body wall. The blades are then reversed with the blunt or rounded point inside for cutting along the body wall. Used carefully, very little damage is done to internal organs. Dissections may be done on newspapers or in trays or pans to catch the drips. Small fish may be dissected in Styrofoam meat packing trays. Check with your butcher to see if you can purchase some.