

Barbarians at the Lake

What's Wrong with Bowfishing?

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I thought after noodling, seining, electric sampling, dip netting, deep-sea fishing and every kind of hook and line fishing I could find that I had done it all. As life tends to do I found out otherwise. There is a subculture of Fishermen that have a zest and passion for fishing that is lost in many circles. They love what they do and it's not for the tourney money or the fame because they get none of that. They fish strictly for love. These folks are in many ways how fishing used to be before Tourneys and PETA and before many of us hit puberty. Bow fishermen are the Mad Max's of Sport fishing. I've recently become fascinated with the Bow fishers out there I'm not sure whether I found them or they found me but a dialog has been going on between myself the conservation guy and those Barbarians the Bow Fish guys. The more we talked the more I found we had in common.

Bow fishermen are treated as second-class citizens in the sporting world. They are the outcasts of sportsmen. Which explains a bit their talking with me. I am often outspoken in my writings and I consider bass fishermen, trout guys, and recreational collectors and yes Bowfishermen on the same moral footing. My belief that we are all in the same boat does not always set well with people. It is however the truth. We are all users and owners of our natural resources and as such are the stewards of what we have been given. Our license fee's and conservation club activities help 1000's of species of non-game plants and animals. All the while allowing us to enjoy our favorite activity. Take a hike, go fishing or deer hunting then thank you local sportsmen from generations past for the privilege. No one who purchases a license and follows the regulations is better or worse than any one else. It is as simple as that.

The complaints against Bow Fishing are the typical ones. Bow Fishing is cruel, unfair and wasteful etc. So lets take a look at these complaints logically. First and foremost is the cruel, lethal nature of the Bow Fishing activity. Of course those in the Anti Fishing crowd will complain it is cruel to kill a carp with an arrow. Guess What Nature is cruel. Almost all animals will face a cruel death. You think an Arrow is cruel? Verses what, being eaten alive by a Bass or Heron. Perhaps being munched upon by an Otter would be preferable? Wouldn't it be better to become feeble due to old age or disease and then be eaten while still alive by a turtle? The food chain is cruel. Animals eat each other all the time to survive and have no emotional response to those that suffer. Do you think the Carp all get together and talk sadly about the nest of Bass Eggs they just consumed? Of course not, they don't care. If you really want to talk cruel, how about letting a known destroyer of entire aquatic ecosystems, the Carp, off your fish hook. Believe me the other citizens of that lake are not cheering your catch and release techniques. Are Bow fishermen flashy? Yes . Is Bow fishing for everyone? No. Does that make them second class citizens and human beings? No. You sportsmen out there do the math. If the Anti crowd can get bow fishing banned because it is "cruel" how long before bow hunting is banned? What about hook and line fishing? Imagine the pain in the mouth of that poor sensitive fish. Oh it is so cruel. It must be stopped no matter how many sportsmen we have to maim to do it. That sentiment folks is what we are up against. I can say without reservation that Bow fishing is not anymore cruel than Nature itself. So if you indict the Bow Fishermen, indict the Heron, indict the Bass, and indict the Hook and Line angler and every predatory beast in this big, beautiful, cruel world we live in.

Now on to the Bow fishing is wasteful argument. Because of the volume in pounds of a typical Bow fishing catch and the fact that the vast majority of their catch is Carp, Buffalo and Gar and other "Rough" fishes. most of their catch is not eaten. This pile of uneaten fish sounds horrible doesn't it? Wanton waste and disregard, oh the tragedy, hundreds of pounds of fish going to waste. Sounds just like the dumpster at Shoney's after an all you can eat Seafood night. The typical fast food restaurant everyday throws away way more pounds of ready to eat food than a typical Bow Fisherman kills. If wasted food is your issue try the dumpsters behind Burger King. Seriously, if your real concern is the waste of marginally suitable food sources Id recommend starting at the dumpster and then after finding use for all those half eaten cheeseburgers head towards a Carpathon. As far as human consumption is concerned Carp, Gar and

Buffalo are a low preference food in this country that's why the Bow Fishermen often can't even give away the tons are Carp they kill. We waste a lot more food in this county at restaurants and grocery stores than the "rough" fish taken and buried by the Bow Fishermen.

"Rough" fish as you may know are any fish that get to a large size but are not used as food fishes. Basically most people in this country don't like to eat them for a variety of reasons. This does not make them a worthless fish or does it mean they should be treated with disrespect (except of course the Carp) it just means people see less of a value to them in a utilitarian and culinary sense. Lets take a look at the preferred prey of the Bow fishermen the Carp, Gar and Buffalo and see what kind of fish we are talking about.

Carp (cyprinus spp): Carp are easily the most invasive species in North America. These fish once native to Europe and Asia are now in all 50 states. Carp are a nightmare to fisheries programs everywhere. Their ability to dominate an environment and destroy fisheries habitat is legendary. Would anyone care to venture a guess at how many millions of our fisheries dollars are spent annually trying to control these beasts. It is a tremendous amount I'm sure. Entire lakes are poisoned in attempts to remove these vermin and restore the lakes to health. Unfortunately there is little fishing pressure on these invaders. One group out there even promotes catch and release of Carp. They must be insane, catch and release of Carp, what next catch and release of cockroaches? Carp are the bad guys of the fish world releasing one ought to be illegal. People killing one ought to be cheered. In Australia they have turned Carp Removal into a whole subculture. You won't hear them talking such nonsense as catch and release Carp. Visit the Carp Busters site at <http://www.carpbusters.com.au/> for some insight into the seriousness of the problem down under. In my opinion all the aggressive exotics should be fished with impunity and never released back alive. I have spoken for years now about my "***once caught never returned***" motto in regards to exotics. Well Bubba a Carp on a stick isn't going anywhere fast and that's just fine with me. If you are still unsure about how devastating Carp are. Do a quick search on www.google.com it will be an eye opening experience.

Gar (attractosteus spp): Gar are a long-lived predatory fish that inhabit sluggish waterways over most of the eastern half of the US. They are occasionally reach over 100lbs. Gar are generally not considered a sport fish but I have found them an exciting quarry and worthy of my attention. Bow fishermen have long known what fun Gar are to fish for. They do it regularly. Because of the lethal means of fishing this offends some people. Myself included. However this issue is simply an issue of legislation. Once Gar become a valuable fishing resource and a means to support the fisheries department believe me they will get the attention they deserve. One of the Bow fishing Groups The Bow fishing Association of America (www.bowfishusa.com) has begun an Alligator Gar Conservation program. That is an approach that I highly commend. It appears that the Bow Fishermen understand the give and take of enjoying a renewable resource and will be a part of the preservation of the Gar. Which has had no advocates for as long as I have been around so I'm certainly glad to see someone sticking up for them. In regards to the Gar I'd like to see reasonable creel limits set and followed. Would I prefer bow fishermen nail Carp and Tilapia instead, yes but it is not my place to restrict the fishing techniques and choices of a law abiding fellow sportsman. So I'm willing to trust our fisheries folks and my fellow sportsmen to manage the Gar fishery well. If they don't I will speak up and so should you.

Buffalo (ictiobus spp.): Buffalo and their cousins the suckers are a group of omnivorous fishes that inhabit lakes and streams. They can get to 20 lbs and above. They share some physical similarity with Carps and are on occasion mistaken for one. However, unlike Carp, they play an important role in the food chain as forage fish for larger predatory fish and can often be the most common fish in many of the places they occur. They differ from Carp in breeding habits, life habits and are a barometer of a healthy water way. Bow fishermen consider Buffalo and Suckers as worthy prey species. They take them as a significant percentage of their catch. I have yet to see any reports indicating that Bow fishing has had a major impact on the populations of the Buffalos and Suckers. Given their omnivorous habit, high reproduction rate and fast growth rate, I do not see Bow Fishing as a major impact on Buffalo populations. However if Bow fishing makes a significant impact a reasonable creel limits is in order.

The dead fish, that is really the last objection to Bow Fishing. We have shown that Bow fishing is not terribly cruel; it is not even wasteful least ways no more than a few Bk's and a Taco Bell. So then what should you do with tons of dead fish? We are not going to eat them so what then? The Australians have turned their Carpathons into moneymakers with their own brand of fertilizer <http://www.charliecarp.com/>. While that may not be a practical solution here yet it is something to look at down the road. People should be creative and think of ways to use the dead fish besides burying them in the ground. Can wildlife rescue places use some carp? Any Mink Farmers out there? What about someone interested in harvesting Carp Eggs ? Perhaps a fishmeal company can step up and sponsor the next Carpathon by taking away the dead carp. Could commercial fishermen work alongside a Bow Fish Tourney? Hog farmers no longer take the fish but other options are available. It's not an insurmountable problem. It is simply a problem of putting the right consumer in touch with the right producer. It is a problem all of us who are sportsmen should ponder for our colleagues. If we can find a use for the Carp and company then the only legitimate concern about Bow fishing is gone. I think it is mostly a problem of public exposure, someone somewhere out there is wishing they had tons of free fish protein to use some how some way and would be happy to pick them up. We just need to find that person or persons.

Bow Fisherman kill tons of Carp. Carp by all serious conservationist accounts are an exotic nuisance species and should be removed whenever encountered. The Bow Fishermen are the only group I know of doing it in wholesale fashion. The Carpathons of the Bow Fishing Association of America are spectacular in their hauls. Instead of being commended by the greater sporting community they are getting flack for their efforts. That is wrong. Bow Fishermen also kill Gar, Buffalo and other "rough" fish. As such they may be doing some harm to their long-term viability, if time proves this out, reasonable creel limits will be enforced. Bow fishermen bring a lot of excitement and passion to the table. Their activities should be managed just like the Bass fisheries. Nothing less is acceptable. The fish are a renewable resource and with proper care should provide eons of sport and food. If Bow fishermen tackle conservation issues with the same zeal as they tackle Bow fishing the Gar need not fear. The Gar would remain the prehistoric king of his domain. Advocated and cared for by his Bow Fishing adversary's

I am happy to say Bow fishermen belong at the fisheries discussion table simple as that. They have earned their spot. Just because a man uses a bow to fish it does not make him a second-class sportsman or human being. Our battle is not with Bow fishermen, it is with the forces that would destroy what we sportsmen have built, The institutions who seek to control what they did not build, The individuals who care about themselves first and the rules second. The poachers, the do nothing protesters those who don't know or care about the science of wildlife management. Those are the things and people we should be against. Not our fellow sportsmen. We could and should all take a lesson from the way Bow Fishermen recruit and enjoy their hobby. They do it with passion and zeal and love. That my friend is what fishing should be about. The love of Nature and the love of what we do. By loving what we do we will in turn, protect all that surrounds our passion. How many great Bass lakes have been lost to Carp? We'll let's take them back one Carpathon at a time! Allow the Bow Fishermen to join the mainstream and we will all benefit, unless of course you are a Carp. As for me I plan on giving this bow fishing a try, as I understand it Carp look particularly nice dressed in arrows.

Until next time good luck and good fishing. RR