

Artificial or Live Bait

The die-hard fisherman is a recluse. Our sport demands it of anyone who aspires to true greatness. Whether it is a lifetime of waking before the sun, weekend nights spent descending service ladders on 100 foot bridges to enhance bait presentation, or even simply embracing the skin-clinging stench of fish and blood that we all know, each hardened angler has been forced to confront the discrepancy between what society expects and what the fish demand. Time and time again, the importance of fish behavior will trump that of what most would consider common sense. During snook season, I have debated with myself and others about whether to sleep for a few hours before fishing an outgoing tide at 2AM or whether to stay up through the night instead. The "normal" question of whether fishing at 2AM before work the next morning – whether or not a nap is involved – has rarely comes up. In certain cases, I have seen once loving relationships crumble, personal hygiene and safety neglected, and large grizzled captains giggle like school-girls. Fishing is a powerful addiction.

This fosters a great deal of understanding and compatriotism between fishermen. We have learned to create our own society, complete with unique regional diction (anyone know the difference between a cobia, ling, and a black kingfish?), varying uniforms, and an economic infrastructure that is truly amazing (recreational fishing has a \$115 billion impact on the US economy according to the American Sportfishing Association). The general spirit of unity between anglers can withstand politics, gender, race, religion, and almost any other divisive subject that has plagued mankind throughout history. Dig deep enough however, and one can observe the only irresolvable debate that threatens to dismantle the fabric of the sport fishing community.

Artificial or Live Bait?

The question of whether to fish artificial lures or live bait has raged since a single Egyptian fisherman fashioned the first top water plug over 4000 years ago. Since then, devoted anglers everywhere have pondered the merits of each approach and given their best attempts to sway others towards their conclusion. Each side of the aisle makes arguments that are worthy of consideration but both groups also approach the problem in alternative ways. With a more comprehensive understanding of these arguments by both parties, perhaps some minds will be changed or some peace within the fishing community can be attained. At the very least however, maybe my roommate will finally save himself some money and stop betting me that his live bait will outfish my artificials wherever and whenever we fish together.

Live-baiters make the claim, and are accurate in doing so, that live and dead bait will catch more fish than artificials 99% of the time. Even as an artificial lure snob, if I see a DOA shrimp fished perfectly next to a fairly well presented live shrimp, I am convinced the live shrimp will be eaten first. No one else I know who exclusively fishes artificials has ever tried to argue this point. The fact is, no matter what action an angler can

impart to his lure, it will still be less authentic than a fish's actual prey item. Until a lure is invented that moves realistically and enticingly, smells like the baitfish that is imitating, emits the correct vibrations and sounds as it moves through the water, and eventually has the taste and consistency of a real food item, live bait will continue to offer fish the most familiar and comfortable chance at a quick meal. The live-baiter's frequent argument that live bait will catch more fish is already understood by most who fish artificials and fails to change most opinions on the matter. The message to those arguing the merits of live bait: we know it catches more fish, next point please.

My great friend and fishing partner Jon has claimed that throwing live bait in the ocean and calling it fishing is like riding a wave on a boogie board and calling it surfing. Jon is a purist. Dedicated to protecting the fish that he pursues, I've watched him lose countless snook of a legendary size because he insists on pinching all his barbs and fishing a single live-bait hook on all of his hard plastics. For the sane amongst us, the distinction between live-baiting and throwing artificials is probably less severe than his surfing analogy. I like to view the live bait fisherman in a slightly different light. One morning this past year, Jon and I were greeted by our friend, Dan, eager to share his story of meeting a girl from the night before. When describing the event, he explained that as he sat playing his acoustic guitar on the outskirts of a party, the girl in question simply sat next to him, waited for him to stop playing, and almost immediately afterwards the two left together. As our friend left the room, I turned to Jon almost without thinking and laughed, "live-baiting just seems too simple, can it still be rewarding?" Upon further reflection however, the similarities between our amorous guitar-playing friend and live-bait fishermen became extensive. Dan had used this technique over and over again with the same results. Sometimes quality of the catch differed, but eventually if he sat and strummed long enough, a girl would pass and almost immediately become interested. Sound familiar live-baiters? Now Dan is an exceptionally talented guitarist, as I'm sure many of you reading this are when it comes to fishing. However, I have watched young men with horrendous guitar playing ability have nearly equal success enchanting girls, and I'm sure we've all seen the novice fisherman catch an unexpectedly large fish immediately upon dropping his line in the water. After asking Dan about this, he unrepentantly stated that girls would be drawn to guitar players regardless of talent; it was simply the act of playing (loosely defined here) that mattered. Thus, while there are certainly degrees of skill with which people can present live-bait and ultimately fight a fish once hooked, it would seem that it provides an advantage that makes the fisherman's job too easy.

This is not true of artificial lures. From the time an angler enters a bait and tackle shop, his mind must manage the thousands of opportunities with which he is presented. Even after deciding on a specific lure, the questions still abound. What area? What season? What target species? What action? What water clarity? What weather? The list goes on. If any of these questions are answered incorrectly, the chances at hooking a fish plummet. The nearly infinite recombination of these questions and answers is one of the beauties of the artificial lifestyle. Every day on the water is different for each

angler, live-baiting or otherwise. However, as an artificial fisherman, the number of variables to consider skyrockets and each decision made can potentially have a far more significant impact than when fishing live bait.

Once these introductory questions have been answered, the true artistry of the artificial angler is given its chance to shine. Anyone who fishes frequently enough has inevitably seen the subtleties in technique between anglers. An angler that is able to impart the correct action to his lure will find success where others do not. As this skill increases, he or she becomes equipped with something in between mastery and divine inspiration. There is a true gift that some people possess that allows them to flick a DOA shrimp in just the right way to entice a strike from even the most lethargic of predators. Commonly, the same lure in the same color with the same leader given the same cadence will still underperform when fished next to a true artificial artist. There are a number of explanations behind this, though each is purely theoretical. Realistically it is probably as simple as a slight change to retrieval speed or aggressiveness of each twitch as the lure moves through the water. Interestingly however, a few years ago a Florida based biologist tried to publish a study that traced fish catching success to the amount and diversity of pheromones produced in the hands of certain anglers. Although the results he found were statistically significant (i.e. those with higher pheromone production DID catch more fish) the journals in which he tried to publish the paper did not deem his article sufficiently scientific to be included. Whatever it is, fishing artificials leaves the potential for true virtuosos to develop their talent and reach the summit of fishing excellence.

We who throw artificials will forever be misunderstood. The argument of catching more fish on live bait will continuously fall short of convincing a dedicated artificial angler. As JFK so eloquently said, "we do these things not because they are easy, but because they are hard." The sense of satisfaction produced from catching a fish on a lure will always (the first superlative I've used in this article) trump that found in using live bait. Anyone who disagrees probably visits Hawaii for the great boogie boarding.