

Fish Shooting

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - Fish Shooting
MAY 18, 2004

Fishing is a sport that has never caught my fancy, except for ice fishing which is largely about drinking rather than fishing. Growing up in the state of Minnesota where fishing is akin to a religious experience it may seem strange that I have not joined the faithful. In addition, over the past three decades I have been living in Florida, the Bass Fishing capital of the universe, where high stakes fishing is considerably more popular than the Tampa Bay Lightning. Here too I have resisted the allure, or is it the lure.

I have tried fishing, although I must admit never fly fishing, and fishing for me seems to be more a catatonic than a religious experience. I have heard people go on and on about fly fishing, I have read Ted Williams' comments on fly fishing, I even read the book and saw the movie, "A River Runs Through It." Nothing happened. I had no visions, I was not transported to another dimension.

Now comes news of another kind of fishing. I must say that when I first saw the headline in the New York Times, "How to Catch Fish in Vermont: No Bait, No Tackle, Just Bullets," I thought I had come upon a piece of satire.

Fish Shooting is legal in Vermont where the right to bear arms has an ominous meaning even for the fish. And it is popular. So popular that after fish shooting was made illegal in 1969 it was reinstated in 1970 increasing the target species to ten in number. It is so popular that the courageous Howard Dean who took on the formidable political machine of the Bush family and assorted Democrats refused to take a public stand on the issue of fish shooting. It is obviously one thing to denounce the Iraq War and quite another to raise doubts about fish shooting.

I have heard of shooting fish in a barrel, but must admit I had never heard of shooting fish in a pond, river, or lake. The law places no restrictions on the firearms of choice for fish shooting. Presumably no one has taken an AK-47 to the little "wiggles of the waterways" although why should anything associated with this bizarre activity be presumed by anyone. If there was any presumption to be made it would be that fish shooting doesn't exist.

It does.

So pack up your side-arms, rifles, automatic pistols, or .357 Magnum's and head out to Vermont where men are men, the fish are at a decided disadvantage, and the state is a madhouse. This is the sort of thing that the mentally skewed just couldn't pass up. Maybe it's something in all that maple syrup consumed up there, or maybe it's the winters. In fact, this sounds suspiciously like an activity that might be hatched in a drunken stupor in mid-January while ice fishing.

So how does it work?

There are several approaches to the revered sport. You can simply sit on the shore of a lake or bank of a stream and take shots whenever you have a visual sighting. You might go out in a small boat, although you should be careful to calibrate the size of the boat to the power of the kick from your fishing weapon of choice. Does displacement ring a bell? For the more ambitious you could build a fish blind thus emulating the millions of duck hunters across the globe.

For the aficionado however there is only one way to approach fish shooting. Climb a tree. Get out on the limb overhanging the water and get that bird's eye view of the fish. You will become part of the landscape, although there is a danger that your perch could give way and suddenly the fisherman could join the swimming prey on Golden Pond.

As in all the great sports there is an art to the activity. Don't actually shoot the fish. Shoot just in front of the fish, creating a concussion strong enough to break the fish's air bladder. Then when the little critter floats to the surface you retrieve the trophy. Shooting the actual fish makes them unsuited for the table as they tend to shatter when shot. Caliber of bullet may also play into this calculation.

Vermont fish and wildlife officials continue to try to ban this sport but luckily they have not succeeded. For many in Vermont fish shooting is a cherished tradition. Ban fish shooting, never! Next thing you know people would want to ban guns. Each generation passes the folk knowledge and folk wisdom surrounding fish shooting to the next. It is a family sport, an intergenerational sport, a Vermont tradition.

There is of course some danger in fish shooting. Like all sporting activities a little knowledge and a little common sense

minimizes the danger. First, you never want to shoot at the water over ten feet away. This will virtually eliminate the danger of a bullet ricocheting or skipping and skimming over the surface of the water. Second, you need to remember that a human being is not a fish. Before you fire be certain you are not taking aim at a local swimmer. Size is a good indicator. Third, use caution when climbing a tree with a gun. You never know what part of your own anatomy might be in the line of fire. Simple steps such as these will continue to keep fish shooting a safe sport and preserve it for generations to come.

There are in fact few reports of injuries in the sport demonstrating what a great sport fish shooting really is, and what a high caliber of people, if we can use that word, are attracted to it.

One other word of caution: The next time you are out along the shore of Lake Champlain be wary of people in trees no matter how docile they look.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't need to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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