

Time Well Wasted

By Karl E. Johnson

Some people just don't understand modern life. Forsaking air-conditioned errands to buy fresh fish, many observe the old ways. Men, women and children squander hours on fishing rituals, posing serious questions about the rationality of this pastime and the sanity of those who pursue it.

Consider the hassle of a typical fishing expedition. Get up at 4 AM, don a generations-old musty vest, strap on baggy rubber clown pants, stumble through mud and brambles to a mosquito-infested stream, tie fake flies made from feathers lifted from dead birds to stubborn nylon line using one hand and a few teeth, and then stare as the current carries them by.

I once ran an after-school fishing program for at-risk youth. Students often missed the program because of detention for smoking, threatening, stealing and worse. Soon, I began to doubt my efforts: Why teach fly-tying to kids who can't read or write? Isn't recreation less important than education? My program, I realized, had become a *reward*. Teachers used it as a bribe to extract good behavior from students who often behaved badly.

While consequences for bad behavior *are* important, this one seemed illogical. Students aren't kept from math or science as punishment, not only because the threat would fail to deter, but also because students *must* learn these subjects. I became convinced that fishing, too, provides educational benefits—ten of which are listed here.

Fishing engages the mind. As Norman MacLean wrote in *A River Runs Through It*, the art of fishing is "looking for answers to questions"—finding the right bait, the right hole, the right timing.

Fishing engages not only the mind but the whole self—body, mind and emotions. Streamside can better civilize passions than classrooms. Love, hate, joy, sorrow, fear and anger can be harnessed only if first aroused.

Fishing teaches ethics. The rules of self-restraint collectively known as *sportsmanship* require integrity. The primary referee in fishing is one's own conscience.

Fishing thwarts delinquency. As Teddy Roosevelt once observed, "Every child has inside him an aching void for excitement," he said, "and if we don't fill it with something which is exciting and interesting and

good for him, he will fill it with something which is exciting and interesting and which isn't good for him."

Fishing initiates the young into culture. Fishing stories and traditions help socialize youth into the norms and mores of family and community.

Fishing unifies people across barriers. Fishing bridges cultural, economic and linguistic barriers. Mentoring transcends the generation gap.

Fishing encourages humility. Fishing shows us that we are not ultimately in control of every aspect of our lives.

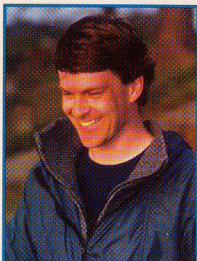
Fishing encourages a commitment to quality and excellence. The secret, as many nature writers have testified, is to transcend outcome and value means and process at least as highly as the product.

Fishing fosters the appreciation of nature. Fishing brings knowledge of fish, ecology, weather, worms and bugs.

The best reason to fish, however, is the simplest and most profound: **Fishing is fun.** "Fishing begins in delight and ends in wisdom," to paraphrase Robert Frost. One fishes not for moral or educational outcomes but simply to fish. The lessons are by-products, but they are real. Fishing is perhaps most profitable when sought for pure pleasure.

The philosopher C.S. Lewis once wrote that the devil hates innocent pastimes because they promote charity, courage and contentment. In an age of performance anxiety, impending deadlines, instant gratification, conspicuous consumption, compulsive achievement, and obsessive productivity, the simple pleasures of fishing might be an antidote to our collective neuroses.

Fishing may not be productive—in that sense it is a waste of time. But, all things considered, it is time well wasted.



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