Kameryn Rome

Feature Writing

Full Circle Fishing Conservation

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He wakes up at five in the morning, puts on his Yamaha hat, Columbia fishing shirt, a pair of khaki shorts and white New Balance shoes. He packed his boat the night before with a tackle box containing top-water baits, spinner baits, plastic worms, artificial lures, fishing weights and hooks. In his boat are ten different fishing poles with the baits already tied on them. He puts an ice chest in his truck with sandwiches and drinks, leaves his house and arrives at the boat launch for dawn. After he launches his boat, he navigates where he wants to fish in the Atchafalaya Basin. “There is always plenty of fish here, there always has been, there always will be,” the fisherman says as he casts his rod into the water.

There was no such thing as fishing conservation when he first started fishing. He kept everything that he caught. Everybody at the time kept the fish they caught. The fun of fishing was bringing back the ice chest full of fish and showing them to everybody. He would go back to the camp, clean the fish and have fish fries with his friends and family.

He never worried about conserving fish because he thought it was a never ending well of plenty. He thought because the fishing in South Louisiana was so abundant, that no one could hurt it. Through the years, he found out differently, the fish population in the bayous could get hurt through people taking too many out or by forces of nature such as hurricanes.

 One day, he fished with a friend. After the trip, they went back to their friend’s camp with the big, beautiful fish they caught and used their filleting knives to clean the fish. As he cut into the fish’s belly, eggs started flying everywhere. He looked at his friend and said, “This is crazy, look at all the fish that we are killing, that’s fish we could be catching later on, but you ain’t going to catch them now.” And that is when he realized that he needed to start conserving fish. Since then he has seldom brought a fish home.

 Gerald Rome, an avid fishing conservationist, started fishing seriously in the late 1950s about the time he got married and has been fishing more than 55 years. Rome fishes for mainly bass in the Atchafalaya Basin and the Lake Verret areas. Located in south central Louisiana, the Atchafalaya Basin, is the largest contiguous river-floodplain swamp in North America and contains almost one million acres of America's most significant bottomland hardwoods, swamps, bayous, and backwater lakes. This makes it a popular destination for freshwater anglers in Louisiana. Rome has learned the waterways of the area by what he calls “hook and crook” and from experience:

“I’ll go through a particular canal from the landing, decide I’m going to go to one area and then I go a little ways more and learn some more area of the canals and remember it for my next trip. There are no street signs but some maps will have names of the bayous or canals where I go. I sometimes make up my own names, by using things that trigger my memory. One canal I call the “Washing Machine Canal” because there was an old washer near the bank that someone had left there.”

 Rome has kept records of every fishing trip he has made since June of 1968. He started keeping his records in an old green book with slightly torn edges. Inside the book he free-hands a log of information from each trip. His friend Brent Roy, co-editor of the *Pointe Coupee Journal* in New Roads, Louisiana, gave him a document called a *Fish Log* where he now records all of his fishing details. The information includes the date, location he fishes, weather conditions, baits used, barometric pressure, water temperatures and any particular patterns noticed on his trip. He also has includes news articles, fishing reports and photos. They are all kept neatly in file folders in the top of his closet, where he can refer back to previous days, months and years of vital fishing information.

 In 1973, Rome joined the *Sunshine Bass Club* in Donaldsonville where he lives. It’s a group of men who love bass fishing and competing in monthly tournaments. They started conserving fish as a group in 1985. Rome said, “As a club, after the tournaments we used to go to the president of the club’s camp along Belle River and fry all of the fish we caught. We decided as a group that this wasn’t working out for us; we better start releasing these fish instead of slaughtering them.” Rome explains that men in the bass club these days and tournament fishers in general keep very few fish. “Whenever we have a tournament, we usually release our fish right where we are fishing. There might be a question on whether or not the fish we release stay alive, but they have a better chance of staying alive if we released them rather than putting an electric knife on them.”

Rome has also fished as a co-angler with several Bass Master Classic champions, professional fisherman at the highest level, in open tournaments by being a member of Bass Anglers Sportsman Society (BASS). As a co-angler he navigates where to go on the fishing trip. He is a well-respected member of BASS and the pro-anglers request to fish with him because he has fished Louisiana water for so long, knows the waterways, and knows where the fish are biting. Rome explained conservation of fish on a professional level is one of the highest forms of conservation. He says there are catch and release boats that will release the fish in different areas immediately after they are weighed in for the tournament.

 In 1992, after Hurricane Andrew, Rome and some members of the *Sunshine Bass Club* were able to participate in another important phase of fish conservation in the Atchafalaya Basin. They were asked to assist the Louisiana Department Wildlife and Fisheries by distributing bass fingerlings, baby bass, after a large fish kill caused by the storm. Rome said that this was the largest fish kill in the history of Louisiana, with more than 200 million fish killed because during the hurricane, leaves, branches and debris fell into the water and decayed. The decaying of the leaves and debris in the water takes the dissolved oxygen in the water that the fish need to survive. Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries asked the *Sunshine Bass Club* to help with the restocking because they were known for their past conservation efforts and knew the Basin area.

 Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries was able to get Largemouth Bass fingerlings from the Florida Department of Wildlife and Fisheries to help repopulate the Atchafalaya Basin. Members of the *Sunshine Bass Club* and members of the community gathered to help distribute the fish. “The Wildlife and Fisheries came to the Belle River Landing and we left in our boats. They’d give us each a big bag of fingerlings, as much as 50-75 fingerlings to a bag. Florida bass fingerlings are about 3 inches long. We put the fish in our live wells in our boats and went to drop them off in different spots in the Atchafalaya Basin,” Rome said. He explained he probably made about three trips to the boat launch that day. In the long run, he believes it has helped for a while, but he says now Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries reported it causes problems.

Mike Wood, biologist director of Inland Fisheries with the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, explained that after Hurricane Andrew the waters in the Atchafalaya Basin changed overnight, causing the fish kill. To allow the fish population to recover, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries took several management actions. Wood said that LDWF received FEMA money after Hurricane Andrew and these funds were used to build a hatchery that allowed the production of Florida bass used to stock the Atchafalaya Basin. He explains that it was a large task but LDWF was dedicated to stocking the Atchafalaya Basin yearly with the Florida bass. According to a technical report from Inland Fisheries on the evaluation of the 14-inch minimum length limit for Largemouth Bass in the Atchafalaya Basin and Lake Verret, in 1993 following the devastating fish kill after Hurricane Andrew there was a 14-inch size limit for the bass implemented by the LDWF and anglers could only keep ten fish. The limit has been monitored in the basin for 22 years. Lieutenant Chad Hebert, LDWF Thibodaux Law Enforcement Division, said, “One of the reasons why they enforced the 14 inch limit was because they were trying to grow trophy fish in the Basin that would attract people from all over.”

 Wood said the action taken by LDWF was to help with the system recovery. He explained, “We monitored the recovery and what we found was surprising of those millions of bass that we stocked in the Basin, not all that many grew to spawn. The fish that were there were survivors there was the spawns of the native bass that repopulated the Basin.” Wood said in a large fish kill such as the one that happened in the Atchafalaya Basin, LDWF felt it needed to intervene, but in all fish kills it may not always be necessary for them to act: “Our current management strategy is much different than it was in 1992 after Hurricane Andrew. Now instead of reacting to the kill, they monitor the recovery. Sometimes action is not necessary and the fish learn to adapt to new conditions.”

Lt. Hebert said LDWF is in the process of changing the 14-inch limit in the basin: “It’s mostly a public outcry. People are starting to complain that all they catch is 12- and 13-inch fish and plenty of them, so they want to drop the size limit of the fish and allow anglers to keep seven fish.” He explained that LDWF is having a meeting in the next couple of weeks to evaluate the situation and go back to the regular state limit. Hebert says the 14-inches is more of a public issue than a fish sustainability issue.

Wood explained the public was favorable to the decision on the change of the 14 inch limit and the law is in the process of going through legislation but should be effective by June 20, 2013. He said, “What we have found through 20 years from Hurricane Andrew is that natural influences, nature influences affect the population more than we can with our stockings and regulations. It’s a dynamic situation that we could make effort to do it, but our follow up study determined that the regulations nor the stockings were effective and nature takes care of its own.”

Rome’s opinion as a conservationist on the changes on the 14-inch limit is that he is against it because he said it is ingrained in him to conserve fish. Rome’s wife, Pookie said, “He has preached to his children, grandchildren, and anybody else who will listen to him about the conservation of fish. Gerald Rome knows different people have different views on fishing conservation than he does. “Once I made the decision to conserve the fish that I caught, I stuck to it. It wasn’t working out for me to keeping the fish, when instead I could release them and they would be around for future generations. I mean I tell other people about fish conservation, but everyone is going to do what they’re going to do.” Rome does not hold it against anyone who wants to keep fish but in his opinion they are too valuable to keep.

 One day in late February 1992, seven years after Hurricane Andrew, after the fish kill and restocking, Rome was fishing along the banks of the Basin in Flat Lake along Bear Bayou, when he caught a six-pound bass. He was surprised because the fish was much larger than other fish he had been catching. He brought it to *Fremin’s*, a gas station near the boat launch, and weighed the fish. Rome, of course, let the fish go near the boat launch.

 Rome told two of his fishing buddies about the large fish he caught and weighed at Fremin’s and they decided they had to go fishing the next day to see for themselves. He said he fished alone in his boat and his other two friend’s fished in another boat. Rome decided to take his chances and fish in the Basin again in Flat Lake near the banks of Bear Bayou, around the same place he had earlier caught the six-pound fish. This time, he cast his rod, and shortly after, he felt a large tug on his line: “I didn’t know what it was. It was so strong. It got all tangled up in the lilies and I had to net the fish. I picked her up along with about another five or six pounds of lilies. When I pulled the fish out of the net, I almost fell down when I saw how big the fish was. I had never seen anything that big before.” Rome brought it down the bayou where his friends were fishing in another boat. “I picked that fish up out of the live well. She was alive and kicking. And my friend’s words were ‘Good God Almighty.’”

Again Rome got in his boat and brought the fish to Freeman’s to weigh it; however, this time Rome’s tactics were a bit different. He put the fish in the live well of his boat with the water circulating from the boat to keep her alive, brought the boat to the landing, put the boat on his trailer and brought his boat to Freeman’s to weigh his fish. It was 10 pounds and 3 ounces and as far as Rome knows it is the second largest fish ever caught in the Atchafalaya Basin and his largest to date. After weighing his trophy fish he put the fish back in the live well, launched his boat and brought the fish back to the exact spot where he caught it.

Rome would have loved to have mounted this trophy fish because it was the

largest he ever caught. Instead he took photos of it and had an exact replica made. His love of fishing has brought him full circle because the fish he caught was probably one of the fingerlings he had released years earlier.