

Catch The EXCITEMENT!

Kayak fishing is one of the fastest growing segments in the sport fishing industry. From coast to coast, fishermen and women have discovered what an extremely effective fishing platform the kayak can be. South Florida Sport Fishing Magazine is proud to present the first in a series of articles about the sport. In future issues we'll address fishing techniques, review different boats, help you rig your own kayak, report on some great fishing locations and keep you abreast of coming events and tournaments.

EXTREME
KAYAK FISHING
IS HERE TO STAY!

By Capt. Charles Wright



Why is it that anglers seem to be driven by an internal force to fish? What fuels our passion for being on the water? Why is it we do what we do? Is it simply being on the water? Few things can match the feeling of freedom and serenity that you feel when you're around the water. Open water, whether you're on it, in it or even just near it, is a powerful attractant for most. The South Florida lifestyle *is* water. These feelings about our surroundings dictate our lives and lifestyles.



Being in the outdoors and feeling a part of nature has to be a component of this drive that we have. On the water, you're away from everyday pressures of life. Whether watching an osprey crash on a ladyfish, a raccoon searching an oyster bar at low tide or porpoises cooperating together to herd mullet in a bay; when we're there we feel as if we're a part of nature. Simply being amongst these settings allows us to feel as if we are a piece of that world and sometimes, humbly, part of the food chain. We want to be as close as we can be and be there as often as we can. But, again, why sport fishing? Would not a hike in the woods get us this "close to nature" feeling?

Perhaps, it is the camaraderie of our fellow fishing enthusiast that draws us in. I know few who enjoy being alone for any length of time. Although, we all need some space and time to ourselves. After all, *time* is the most precious commodity. Time spent alone in special places and circumstances can't be replaced. But sharing experiences with friends is also extremely rewarding.

Personally, I love watching people catch fish as much as I like catching them myself. Few things can compare with the look in an angler's



Capt. Bruce Hitchcock



face when they're about to be spooled by a permit streaking toward the horizon. Every face on the boat lights up when a huge, glistening tarpon launches into the air. Fishing offers us something in common with our group of friends, something unique and special to us that we can share among one another. This sense of shared experiences is a big part of why we do what we do.

Perhaps, it's the raw excitement that draws us to fishing. The rush that you get from watching a sailfish or dolphin chase your trolled bait is powerful. The explosion of a double digit snook crashing a top water plug is also, without a doubt, addicting.

These days it seems that I get very little "rod time," so it's precious to me. On one of those rare occasions when a good friend was poling and I was fishing, we saw a bonefish that we both estimated to be 13 pounds. I have seen and caught plenty of bones, but watching that big tailing fish while I worked to get in position to present the fly was so exciting that I was shaking — shaking so much that I missed the cast and spooked the fish. That, however, was ok. Just being there was the real thrill. The excitement, the *rush*, is part of the passion that we call sport fishing.

The typical sport fisherman competes with himself and the environment; not with others. Unlike the competition to better our lives, where failure can have dramatic impact on our families and future, fishing only has rewards. Fishing offers an incredible escape from the reality of daily life. For example, I'm happy when a fellow fisherman catches five snook and I caught only two ... after all I did catch two! That's



usually not the case outside of sport fishing. When a colleague out competes you and advances ahead, it might be years before you get another opportunity. Your next opportunity for a redfish is on the very next cast! There are no failures ... only chances for successes.

A fisherman is a constantly evolving critter. As a fishing guide, I see it all the time. In the beginning of an angler's career, a day of fishing is defined as a day of catching. Things are as good as they can be as long as he's catching fish, no matter what species. Soon, he will evolve and challenge himself to catch a limit of trout, for example. Next time he may seek a limit of trout using only artificial lures ... then only top water plugs. How about the inshore slam and then the inshore slam on fly! I have anglers who love the personal challenge aspect so much they've evolved to throwing top water plugs to permit at night. Talk about challenging!

The sport fishing industry too is evolving. Occasionally something comes along that revolutionizes the industry. Products like saltwater trolling motors or plastic jerk baits have dramatically changed the industry. Technical poling skiffs are a good example of industry evolution. Twenty-five years ago, my plywood decked 13' Whaler was about the only boat that I saw in the shallows. That's not the case now. There are scores of manufactures and numerous models to choose from. Hundreds of boats inundate Florida's flats every day.

KAYAKS are revolutionizing the sport fishing industry as well. Fishing out of a kayak is one of the fastest growing segments of the shallow water fishing industry because it's a way to be closer to nature and a very effective way to fish. Serious fishermen have re-discovered the kayak as an extremely productive platform. The word is out and fishermen across the country are turning to kayaks. Manufacturers are starting to build kayaks specifically for fishing, with some models so popular that dealers have three and four month backlogs. Advanced gear, tackle, rigging, and equipment are being introduced on a daily



basis. Specialty guides services are available in most fisheries, clubs have formed, kayak fishing tournaments are increasing, and excursions and lodges specifically for kayak fishermen are popping up everywhere.

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is no hardware to polish, gel coat to wax, electrical systems to corrode, trailer bearings to pack or oil to change. The fishing kayak requires no fuel, no insurance, no trailer, no tow vehicle and basically zero maintenance. Most importantly, the kayak provides access to areas that you simply can't get to by other means. Weighing about 50 pounds, a kayak transports on top of a compact car and can be launched by one person just about anywhere there is a few inches of water.

YAKS are so simple and easy that many anglers can load up, be at the launch site and in the water in the less time then it takes to get their power boat ready for a trip. You don't even need a boat ramp! Think about how long it takes you to properly clean and store everything after a fishing trip. Many find that they use their kayaks more often than their powerboats. The ease of use and simplicity of the fishing kayak makes the quick, after-work trip practical.

Kayaks are being used in both deep and shallow water fisheries. Whether fishing vertically in deep water or horizontally in shallow water, the kayak is a great fishing platform. Some are seeking and catching dolphin, sailfish, sharks and giant tarpon in deep water from their yaks. But, the kayak is coming into its own in the shallow waters of South Florida.

Success in the shallows depends largely on stealth, whether you are stalking bones in the Keys, tailing redfish in Mosquito Lagoon, or snook and tarpon in the 10,000 Islands. One slam of a hatch, a dropped tool on the deck or a graphite push pole twanged into a rock and the game is over! Boat manufacturers sink huge amounts of time, energy, and money into the design of expensive flats boats trying to make them silent in the shallows. Stealth is King and the kayak is the King of Stealth.

You can achieve amazing stealth with a kayak by silently gliding into your fishing area undetected. The only sound that you typically hear is the paddles dipping into the water. I fish in the backcountry of the 10,000 Islands where tarpon even seem to be attracted to the sound of the paddles. I'm the one who has actually been spooked many times by rolling tarpon only a few feet from my kayak.

In almost every shallow water fishery, at low tide, fish tend to fall in the deeper holes. You will find predatory fish seeking this deeper cover in grass flats, a channel near a mangrove shoreline or a tide-eroded depression near an oyster bar. Getting to the fish is all but impossible with a traditional boat, and in many places you can rarely get in without spooking the fish. The silence and stealth of the kayak amazes me every time I am in one. There is a whole new fishing world that has opened up for me as a shallow water angler ... a world that I used to motor right by.

When a kingfisher smacks the water, a mullet jumps across the bow or one of those little tarpon startles me, it all happens very close. The fish and the action are both closer to you in a fishing kayak than in a boat. You notice things around

It's easy to see why fishermen are embracing the kayak as the costs of power boating can be substantial. It's hard to get a new outfitted flats boat without spending well over \$20,000. A boat becomes a major investment for most households after factoring the costs of insurance, interest, fuel, taxes, storage, trailer and a towing vehicle. The kayak's low upfront and continuing costs make it economical. A typical fishing kayak costs several hundred to about seven hundred dollars. Completely outfitted for fishing, including paddles and all required safety gear, you're looking at about a thousand bucks ... a far cry from the cost of any flats boat.

It takes but a few well placed rod holders, some safety equipment and perhaps an anchor to turn that old recreational kayak in the backyard into a fishing kayak. While the basic kayak is a very effective fishing platform in its simplest form, like every other boat on the water, if it can be customized and rigged, someone is going to do it. Many enthusiasts have rigged their "yaks" with multiple anchoring systems, back rests, a variety of storage options, coolers, bait wells, batteries, pumps, GPS units, sonar, radios and even camera mounts. However, kayak rigging is the subject of another whole article.

A kayak is easy to use and simple to maintain. A quick rinse with fresh water is usually all that she'll need. Most are made of plastic, so there



"MORNING LAUNCH..."

photo: Crystal Murray



you that you can't at 40 mph. When a tarpon or a ladyfish jumps, you don't see it at eye level, it's jumping over your head! Looking up at a tumbling tarpon is an absolute thrill.

The kayak has rejuvenated my enthusiasm for sport fishing. All the species that I have caught in my fishing career I now get to target in my kayak. I now can now get to areas I could not get to before. This spring, I intend filming a triple-digit tarpon coming over the side of a kayak ... If I am not behind the camera, I intend to be behind the rod.

Many kayak anglers have been doing their thing all along, un-noticed by the "mainstream" world of traditional fishermen. They have been fishing waters that most of us would consider inaccessible. Their private places have remained their secret paradises for years. The blue water charter captain and the Midwest bass guide rarely saw kayak fishermen and the west coast kayak fisherman

knew nothing of east coast kayak fisherman. The birth of the Internet has changed all that. The Internet catalyzed the terrific rise in popularity of the sport of kayak fishing.

In Ken Daubert's book, "Kayak Fishing: The Revolution," he calls the Internet the "fuel to the fire of this (kayak fishing) phenomenon." For the kayak fisherman, it provides the means for this disorganized group of enthusiasts to learn from each other. Kayakers rapidly exchange ideas on rigging their boats, fishing techniques, fisheries, launch sites, and share their experiences with others. It has become the back-bone of what Ken calls the "Kayak Fishing Community". A community, made up of fisherman, guides, outfitters, paddle shops, manufacturers, merchandisers, sports-writers and publishers.

Well until next time, get out there and paddle up a creek!



Capt. Charles Wright runs Chokoloskee Charters. With four different boats to choose from, he is able to allow his anglers an opportunity to experience all the fishing opportunities the area has to offer. He grew up in south Florida and the Keys and has fished the Everglades National Park since 1972. Schooled as an environmental engineer and an FAA Certified Flight Instructor, he sold his consulting firm and moved to Chokoloskee after hurricane Andrew. Using a small private plane, he regularly scouts the area for new fishing grounds. This is a unique "on top" perspective to the area. Besides Florida's southwest coast, Charles regularly fishes the Florida Keys, Miami and the Bahamas, but he maintains fishing the Chokoloskee area is the best the state has to offer.

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