



photo - Art Michaels

RESPECT:

THE HEART OF ANGLING ETHICS

by Tim Trainer

Three incidents I witnessed while fishing for steelhead in the Lake Erie tributaries during the past year have spurred my thinking on fishing etiquette. Although all of these incidents occurred while steelhead fishing, the ethics considerations they prompted can be applied anywhere.

● My older brother and I had my 12-year-old son and his friend in tow on their first steelhead trip last year. High water throughout the tribs prompted us to stop by the Walnut Creek Access, which includes concrete walls that provide shelter from the muddy stream waters and easy access to fishable water. We left the boys in the car in the parking lot while my brother and I walked to the water to check the action.

As we made our way to the marina, we were initially excited to see the sharp bend in one angler's noodle rod. However, what we witnessed next shocked us and led to our speedy departure.

Two guys were in the midst of one of the most heated arguments I have ever had the misfortune to witness. One of

the men had a fish on and apparently had asked the other to net it. The water's surface is a good five feet down from the top of the concrete wall at the marina, requiring a long-handled net to land a fish. Apparently, the guy with the net took offense to the other angler's success in an area he was fishing, as if he owned the fish and the water, and refused to lend his net to the guy with the fish on. Another angler fishing on the other side of the marina ran over with his net to help his fellow angler and net the fish.

Once the fish was pulled from the water, the argument erupted into a series of curses and insults like none I had heard before. These salty salvos were more than offensive. I felt ashamed and embarrassed for the behavior of both these men, who should have known better, and expressed a sigh of relief that my son and his friend had stayed in the car. I'm certainly glad they didn't have to witness these verbal assaults.

As we left the marina area, we passed a Fish & Boat Commission waterways conservation officer speeding down the access road with his emergency lights flashing. Both my

brother and I were glad someone had the courage to take out his cell phone and report this despicable behavior, a clear case of disorderly conduct.

● On another outing, my brother and I were catching fish in the Elk Creek area known as the “mud hole.” We were having a blast when we noticed a floating fly line come shooting down directly in front of us. A fly fisherman, probably emboldened by our success, had waded into the head of the hole and cast his line downstream, directly in front of us and the anglers on each side and across the stream, making it difficult if not impossible for any anglers surrounding the hole to cast. He seemed determined to be rude, so we decided to find another spot.

● The third incident occurred when my brother hooked a fish, and an angler across the stream snagged his line. Initially, a tug of war took place with both anglers thinking they had the fish. When it became clear that the other angler’s presentation was not in the fish’s mouth but hooked onto my brother’s line, my brother asked him to let out line so he could land the fish. The other angler indicated that he was not inclined to do so, and while he started to argue, I quickly scooped the fighting fish with the net.

When it was clear that the other angler’s presentation rested at the end of my brother’s rod in a giant “bird’s nest,” he finally let out some line, adding, “Don’t cut my line!” My brother cut his own line and let the other guy reel in the massive tangle.

Fishing is a privilege

These incidents caused me to consider social interaction among anglers, the vast majority of which are enjoyable, positive, chummy, “chew-the-fat” conversations marked by a few animated fish tales and plenty of smiles and laughs. But there are the experiences I mentioned, the clear, obvious examples of the opposite of fun. It’s easy to see how many anglers who suffer through such unpleasant circumstances could become jaded and resist interactions with other anglers. In this time of growing litigiousness, road rage and human disconnects, more people unfortunately are apt to ignore and avoid other anglers than not. That’s sad.

Fishing has always had its social aspects, and even more so in the modern world. The growing number of anglers and increased interest in fishing are great for the sport, but they also put more people on the streams and lakes where they interact regularly. The interplay among anglers parallels human behavior in all social activities.

As in life, fishing etiquette involves respect: Respect for yourself, for the fish, for landowners, for the environment and for your fellow anglers. The golden rule of “do unto others as you would have others do unto you” applies on the water as much as anywhere else.

Fishing, after all, is a privilege, not a right. I believe that the license affirms one’s intention to respect the fishing regulations of the Commonwealth—and part of that privi-

If you feel compelled to report an alleged violation, obtain information like a person’s description, fishing license number, vehicle license plate number, and time and place of the alleged violation. Report this information to a waterways conservation officer, or call it in to the regional law enforcement office. If you take such steps, be prepared to appear in court as a witness.

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Offer assistance, such as netting a fish, but first make sure to ask if the angler wants help. Most people will gladly accept help, but some anglers prefer to do it all themselves. It's certainly courteous to offer assistance, and gracious to accept it.

lege is having the opportunity to meet, converse and enjoy the company of other anglers on and off the water. It all starts with respect.

Etiquette dos and don'ts

Here are some reminders for interacting with other anglers in a way that keeps fishing fun and enjoyable for all.

How should an angler conduct himself? An angler on the water should behave as he would in his workplace, home, place of worship or neighborhood. Being outdoors is no excuse for boorish, rude or disorderly conduct.

When is an angler crowding another angler? When he imposes on another angler's ability to fish. If you think someone is crowding you, take your fishing elsewhere and refrain from attempting to fish water that is already surrounded by anglers. There's plenty of other water to fish.

Is it OK to offer assistance, such as netting another angler's fish? Yes, but first make sure to ask if the angler wants help. Some anglers prefer to do it all themselves. It's certainly courteous to offer assistance, and gracious to accept it.

What's the proper way to untangle lines? The angler closest to the snag should reel in and untangle the lines, if possible. The angler farther away should release line. If the snag is too difficult to untangle, cut the reeled-in line (but ask first) and allow the other angler to retrieve his presentation and the line he released.

Should you inform a fellow angler of a possible violation? No. If you feel compelled to report an alleged violation, obtain information like a person's fishing license number, vehicle license plate number, description, and time and place of the alleged violation. Report this information to a waterways conservation officer, or call it in to the regional law enforcement office. If you take such steps, be prepared to appear in court as a witness.

By following these simple guidelines and having respect for yourself by showing it to other anglers, the fish and the environment, you can make sure that wherever you fish, the sport remains the fun activity it's meant to be. ☐