



AS SEEN IN THE MARCH/APRIL 2006 ISSUE

Yak fishermen explore new ways to reach untapped fisheries.

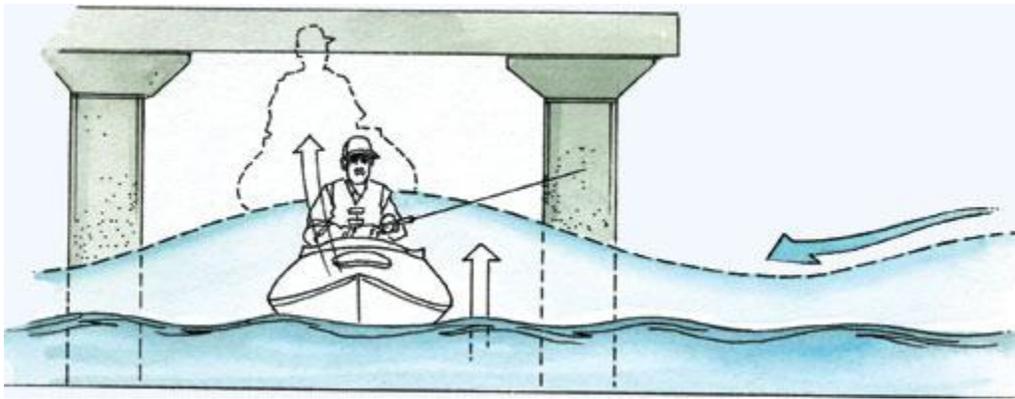
My connection to the big, mystery fish down below came to a quick but definite end. There was a solid strike, a very powerful pull for a few feet, a sudden wrap around a concrete piling, and our relationship was over. Whatever my visitor was, he left me about as quickly as he showed up. While I spent the next few minutes considering my frayed line where it had been damaged on the jagged barnacles, I heard the tremble of an outboard approaching. I could clearly hear the motor come to an idle and a couple of fellows talking.

“There’s got to be fish here!” one said. “Looks like there should be,” the other replied before I heard their casts bounce off the outside of the concrete pilings. “I’ve tried here before,” the second fisherman continued, “but I’ve never really done much.”

I re-rigged as I overheard my fellow fishermen converse. I even waited to see how they did before I went back to my own quest. It didn’t take long. They fished for perhaps ten minutes, caught nothing, and left to investigate what was going on in the pass a mile or so down the bay. The last thing I overheard one of them say before they fired up their motor was, “I guess if there are any fish here, they’re going to stay here.”

As it turned out, that fellow was partly right and partly wrong. The right part was that fish were in fact there. The wrong part was that the fish were staying there. At least a few were coming home with me that day.

Let me clarify that the reason those gents came so close to where I was fishing was not because they were exercising bad fishing habits. Rather, they just couldn't see me. They were drifting along the outside perimeter of the old, abandoned wharf, casting to the outer edges. I, on the other hand, was positioned directly under the large, weathered dock, tied off to one of the center pilings. No, I was not swimming. I was in my kayak dropping baits straight down, and I was having a ball with sheepshead that were not the least bit shy about snatching my live shrimp. This 'up-close' approach of directly fishing in the midst of such structure has worked well for me on many occasions, so please read on, as I'd like to share my experiences with you.

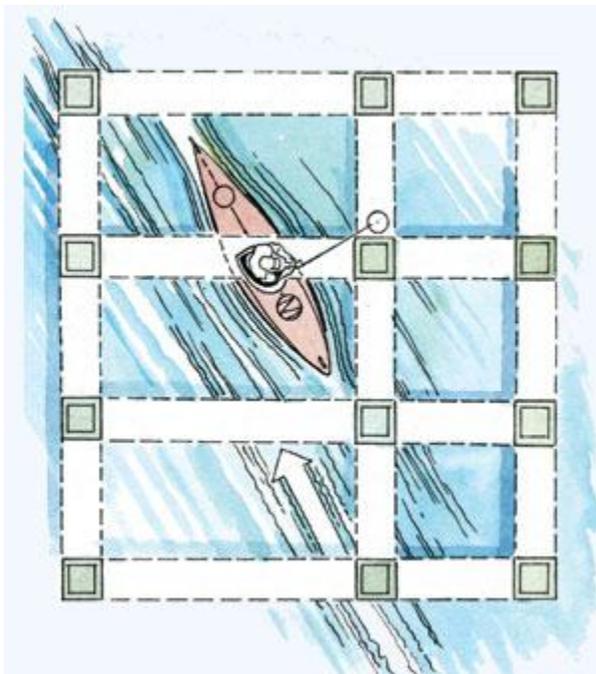


With all the glorious weather we've been blessed with over the last few fall seasons, most of Florida's inshore waterways are littered with damaged docks, wharfs, and other shoreline structures which are in serious need of repair, some of which have simply been abandoned. These somewhat obstructed areas always look fishy, but also appear difficult to fish effectively. Well, that's right. They are difficult to fish effectively unless an angler can really get in nice and close. I mean, really close- like directly underneath the structure or right in the middle of all the pilings. While most inshore anglers prefer not to get their tricked-out skiffs anywhere near barnacle and oyster encrusted debris, and I don't blame them, I on the other hand have a completely different philosophy. I like to get in as tight to the structure as possible.

In most cases, even if the fisherman is willing to risk a few scratches and

dents, his boat is just too big to negotiate around and under such structure. So there's the problem. What's the solution? Something small, light, and easy to maneuver. Sounds like a kayak to me.

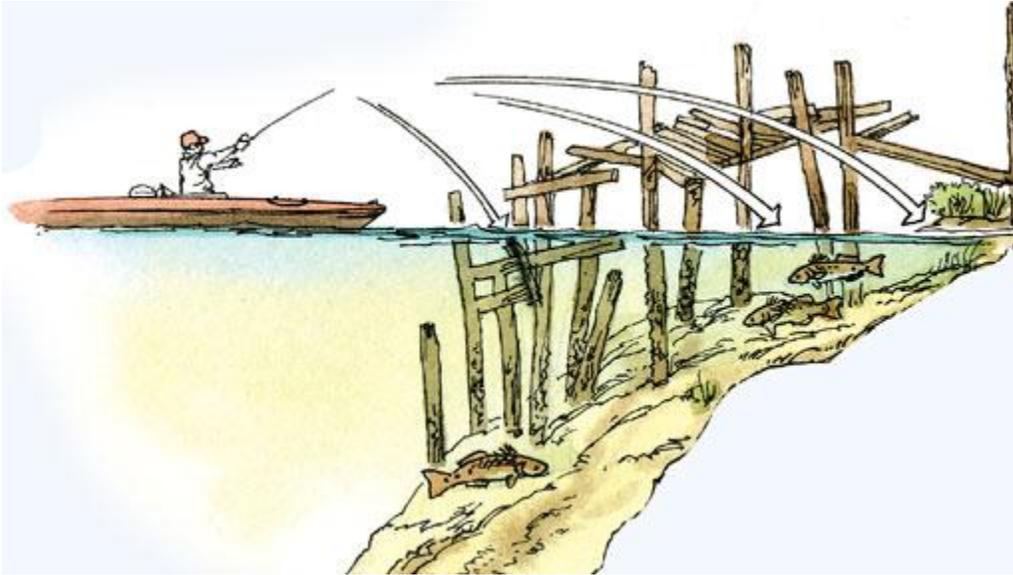
I discovered this sort of structure fishing with a kayak one day when Son #2, my favorite fishing partner, and I were paddling our kayaks around an old wrecked wharf near a National Park along the upper Gulf Coast. We had just launched our kayaks from the beach to investigate a bunch of birds that had been working the area. Though we managed to hook a few bluefish out in the open, I had a gut feeling we were missing out on something. I suggested we edge closer to the old wrecked wharf. As we approached, I peered under the massive concrete crossbeams- the wooden decking was long since gone- and in the shaded area, swore I could see fish hovering. Repositioning for a second, closer look, a concentration of simmering baitfish with much larger fish slashing through the disturbed school came into clear view. I happened to have a small bucktail tied on, proceeded to drop straight down to the bottom some twenty-feet below, jigged it once, twice, and the day suddenly got much better.



That first trip under the pilings was in mid-summer. The next time we

ventured under the wharf came later during the winter. I was hoping to find some early season sheepshead and figured that perhaps they might be holding tight to the structure. My guess was right. I maneuvered my kayak directly under the crossbeams where my first drop with a live shrimp yielded first a sharp tap, then a solid tug. The current was strong, and the striped crab cruncher used it to resist being pulled up. Finally I got him up, and flipped him into the yak. By the way, one of the advantages of fishing a kayak is that the deck is only eight-inches off the water. I was feeling pretty pleased with myself. One drop - one sheepshead. The next four drops leaned the score in the fish's favor with free shrimp dinner for fish - four, guy in kayak - one.

All the while, my son was taking his time locating a prime position in the midst of all the jagged rubble. The strong current made negotiating around the huge pilings a bit difficult, but he finally got himself situated to his satisfaction and dropped his bait to the bottom. I too dropped another shrimp down, but this time the bait never made it to the grungy floor below. Somewhere on the way down, a fish saw my shrimp and obviously found it too good to resist. This thing was quick - much quicker than a sheepshead. I looked down into the clear water, and below I could see the culprit fighting for its life. Silver flashes and quick changes of direction made me think pompano! It turned out that I was correct, and a fine three pound pomp joined my sheepshead. The possibilities for supper were starting to really look promising. Meanwhile, my son had managed to find a bit of trouble of his own. I heard Rob grunt and then yell, "Hey, I'm hooked up to a real nice fish!"



It took me a minute to pull my kayak up to the piling I was tied to and free myself to go offer assistance. As I snaked my way through the concrete legs I heard something break water, and sure enough, it did sound impressive. By the time I reached his position under the wharf, the deed was done. He had strong armed his fish off the bottom, his tackle held up, and he hadn't allowed the fish to wrap around a piling. I saw a broad, brown tail sliding into his kayak. He looked over at me, smiled and said, "Grouper!"

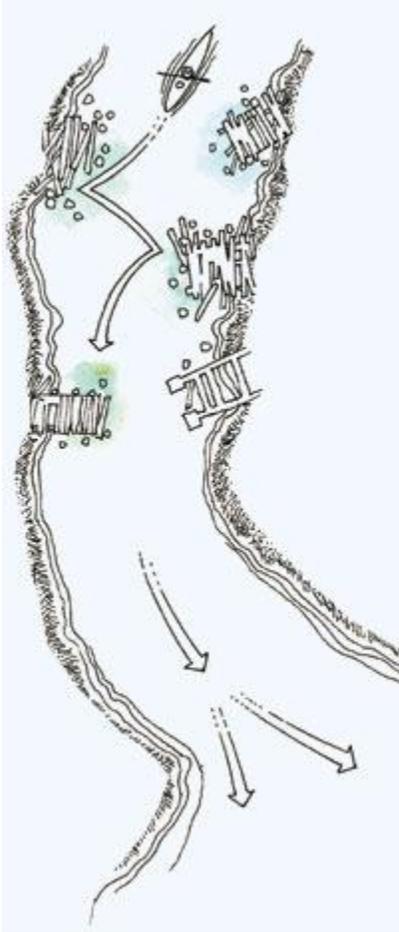
We fished another hour, and as the tide really began to rip with a steady breeze behind it, we made our way from under the wharf. As we carried our kayaks across the narrow beach back to my truck, I knew we had stumbled upon something special. Since, we've been back to this and several other similar docks, wharfs, abandon bridges, and other similar forms of structure, and almost always score big.

I don't claim to be anything special when it comes to fishing, but when you can fish in a place where almost no one else can reach, you don't have to be special. Other than a kayak, no other boat could possibly fish directly under the crossbeams of the old wharf. The yards and yards of assorted fishing line tangled around the pilings was evidence of what happens when someone attempts to cast under the structure. It seems that an angler has to be close enough to drop straight down on top of the fish to achieve the greatest level

of success.

Now, I'll admit that positioning any type of boat under massive concrete abutments or right in the heart of unforgiving wooden pilings might not suit everyone. It can get a bit edgy when the tide is ripping, or when passerby's wakes come rolling through. However, my trusty little kayak can easily and safely get me in places where fish barely see any pressure.

Thanks to the many hurricanes we've all suffered through in the past couple of years, many bays and tributary rivers that feed into the Gulf are full of destroyed property. Docks, in particular, have been hit extremely hard. In many places, where docks used to stand and offer easy access, now are left only pilings and posts both above and below the water. The 'dead' pilings have become fish magnets. The reasons for this are simple to see. First, much of the previous activities around the dock have ceased to exist. Second, most fishermen simply can't or don't want to get close to these damaged docks to fish. It would be foolish to take an outboard motor into the heart of some of these storm created "minefields." One of my most productive spots is just this way.



I enjoy fishing a murky tributary which empties into a major bay which in turn dumps out into the Gulf. This river has always produced, but since the storms, has been exceptionally productive for those who can get on it. The shoreline is littered with dead boats, wreckage from houses, and yes, plenty of dead docks. That's where our yaks come in.

We launch our kayaks, paddle about a hundred yards up-river, and fish a couple of lines of old pilings. It seems that we never have to wait long. Redfish stack up in places like this. They love the heavy, protective cover the pilings afford them. We maneuver right into the pilings, let our shrimp sink, and hang on. At least a couple of times every trip we manage to hook something big, copper colored, and extremely powerful, and have him remove yards of line from our reels before the fish finds the exact piling he wants to break us off on.

In our little kayaks which draw only inches of water, so we can go places where most folks can't. By the way, I believe I know why, in particular, redfish love these pilings so much. The few fish I've taken home to eat were absolutely stuffed with juvenile blue crabs. Why are the crabs there? Because the row of pilings provide a perfectly suitable environment which provides excellent protection from predators, except redfish that is.

So here's something to think about. Perhaps more people ought to consider fishing smack dab in the middle of fish attracting structure like old docks, wharfs, and bridges. It will take a special kind of boat to achieve the optimal presentation, a kayak or something very much like it, but I promise fish are there. Of course, if no one else wants to join me, I'll just keep doing it myself. It's a dirty job, but somebody's got to do it.

Kayak Precautions:

Safety first, fish second!

-Kayaks are small and light, and can easily tip. When fishing around structure-docks, wharfs, pilings, bridges- as always, wear a Personal Floatation Device.

-When fishing under structure, make certain there is enough clearance. When a big wave passes, the kayak and paddler will lift. Being crunched under a concrete crossbeam by a big wave or boat wake is not fun. I've been there and done that.

-Keep a close eye on the current. Underneath any type of structure, the current's effect will be magnified. Don't get crosswise against a piling. The current can make a kayak really squirrely and the situation can quickly turn dangerous.

-Don't keep fish on a stringer. Having a big bull shark attempt to snatch your catch when the fish are on a nylon stringer hanging from your kayak can quickly ruin your entire day. Keep fish inside the boat.

-Be careful when fighting big fish. Though kayaks are very stable, they are a

bit 'tippy' when playing fish from the side. Don't be ashamed to break a fish off if he's too big to handle when you're positioned in a tight place like under a dock. I've broken off big fish in tough places, and you will too.

-Finally, as always when boating, never fish alone. At the very least, let someone know where you're going and when you plan to return.
