

ANGLERS KNOW FISHING IS ABOUT MORE THAN CATCHING

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Running the west beach in the early morning, the most interesting people I encounter are fishermen. They frequent the pocket parks where they can drive to the shoreline to unload their gear. My fascination derives less from their sport than their demeanor. They stand for hours in the surf rhythmically casting, or sit on the beach alongside rods anchored in the sand, lines splayed into the gulf.

Gazing out to sea, well beyond their bobbing corks, fishermen view the earth as peaceful, simple — one horizontal boundary dividing sky and water. On the surface, a world of sea gulls and pelicans gliding serenely in the morning sun. Below, a teeming aquatic biosphere. Each is unique, but neither superior to the other.

No one knows the junction of these parallel universes better than fishermen, alternating between the two with delicate 10-pound-test filament.

On this morning, I encounter a teenage boy standing waist deep on a sand bar, pole in hand. He metrically casts into the surf with a one hundred eighty-degree motion. No earphones. Only the sound of waves washing through the empty basket tied to his belt. He seems familiar.

As I continue my run, I see in my mind's eye the image of another young fisherman I once knew navigating his john boat along a winding waterway in the Atchafalaya River Basin in south Louisiana — the largest wetland and marsh in the United States, where the river and the Gulf of Mexico converge.

When the bayou he's traversing narrows into a swamp, the water turns deep and smooth, thick with cedar trees, their trunks knobby, their branches interwoven — a mass of foliage where the sunlight doesn't penetrate, except in spots. Water hyacinth blankets the surface like an emerald green carpet.

As with all those who first venture here, the swamp speaks to the boy. A long shadow gliding under the boat hints at the mysteries of life below — like the region beneath the horizon on west beach. He's only beginning to see himself as part of the narrative where young men peer across the boundaries of their old province into unknown realms. For him, the swamp is his first glimpse.

The quiet enormity of the submerged forest attracts him like a lodestone. Out of habit, he casts his line. But then realizes that savoring the unique peace and tranquility of the swamp is more important. These are feelings with which he's not familiar, and will never forget.

Over the years, the secrets of the swamp whispered to the boat boy fade. But in his heart, the serenity they engender lives on.

As I complete my run, I spy the young surf angler, now sitting next to his rod and reel propped in the sand. I stop and ask, "Did you do any good today?" He glances down at his empty creel, then looks up at me — the boat boy now gray with years — and replies with a smile, "Well sir, it was good just to be out here."

We both understand.

Malcolm Gibson

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