



Desperately needed: A worldwide fishing federation

I FEEL VERY FORTUNATE because I've made a living through sportfishing. It's been an enriching, exciting career and I've seldom been bored because of the unique challenges and new experiences that constantly presented themselves. The intriguing people, magnetic destinations, incredible episodes and the fascinating species of fish are poignant cameos in a continuous ribbon of fishing adventures.

Periodically, I step back to take a look at the future of angling. What are the major problems facing sportfishing? Are there solutions?

On the surface, it appears that angling is doing extremely well. Take a look at the lavishly designed mail-order fishing catalogs, surf the thousands of web sites, view the many television fishing programs or check out the video tapes and CDs that teach us how and where to fish.

There are more than a thousand fly-fishing books, and dozens of new titles are printed each year. Women are not only attracted to fishing, but

they are also guiding, operating fishing lodges, writing books, teaching, lecturing, designing and recommending tackle! Twenty-five years ago, there were six international fishing travel agencies; today there are more than 600, if one includes the major fly shops and tackle stores that also sell fishing travel. Bass fishermen are paying thousands of dollars for fully equipped, state-of-the-art bass boats, and fishing tournaments are paying huge cash prizes to the winners.

The most important change in the past 25 years is that fishermen understand the importance of catch-and-release policies. If only we had listened to Lee Wulff when he preached release fishing decades ago!

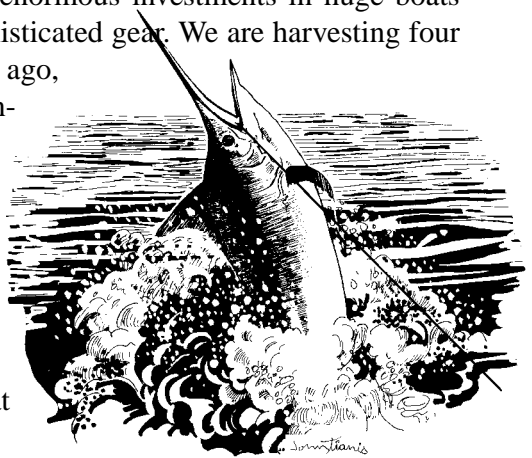
So all is going well for sportfishing? Not exactly.

There are major problems and some of them are so crucial that we must address them immediately with short- and long-term strategic planning. Band-aid solutions will not work. Let's look at just a few important issues that threaten sportfishing:

The enormous demand for fish

Today there is a tremendous shortage of seafood, not only because of the growing population, but also because we have become a health-conscious world and know the nutritional value of fish. This huge demand skyrockets the price of fish to such a point that the commercial fishing companies are willing to make enormous investments in huge boats equipped with deadly, ultra-sophisticated gear. We are harvesting four times as many fish as six years ago, and, at the same time, we're continually losing fishing grounds.

It's estimated that there are enough commercial nets and longlines in the Pacific Ocean alone to circle the earth at its equator. A longliner can put out 25 miles of line with baited hooks every six to 10 feet. Imagine what



damage these nets and longliners can do in a day? In a month? Several years?

Aggressive commercial fishing in the Pacific has decimated marlin, sails and other pelagic species and has greatly depleted anadromous fish including steelhead and salmon.

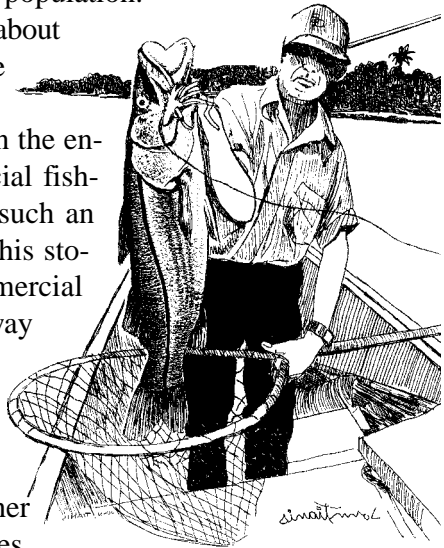
Similarly, fish stocks in the Atlantic and other oceans are being destroyed. The overharvesting by commercial interests almost knocked the Atlantic salmon out of the ocean and on to the endangered species list. Bluefin tuna has virtually disappeared from many waters. We are destroying our oceans at an unbelievable rate because of the insatiable demand for fish and the efficiency of the sophisticated commercial fishing fleets.

It's not only the oceans that are being destroyed. In Latin America, locals and immigrants have netted many bonefish flats, and strategically placed monofilament nets can quickly ruin prime bonefish flats beyond repair. Remember when giant snook were so prevalent along the east coast of Costa Rica that 25- to 30-pound snook earned only a polite "nice fish" comment? Heavy netting, especially at or near the river mouths, has depleted the snook population.

Thankfully, something is being done about the netting on the east coast and the big snook are coming back slowly.

Officially, the swordfish is not on the endangered species list, but commercial fishing has reduced its populations at such an alarming rate that in many waters this storied species no longer exists. Commercial fleets from the United States all the way to Brazil are capturing juveniles.

Freshwater fish are also affected. Check a fish counter at a supermarket and you'll see northern pike, lake trout, walleye, whitefish and other species for sale at skyrocketing prices.



Pollution and acid rain have destroyed thousands of lakes and rivers that, at one time, provided good fishing. There are no fences in the air that prevent the clouds of pollution from drifting from country to country. We think of the Scandinavian countries in terms of pristine environments, mountain lakes, rushing rivers and winding, pastoral streams, but they have suffered massive losses. Norway, for example, has lost total fish stocks in approximately 5,000 lakes! More than a third of her rivers have critical loads of acid rain! And more than 90 percent of the acid rain that falls on Norway *originates in other countries*.

The symbiotic effect of pollution, commercial fishing and disease has destroyed many of the great Norwegian salmon rivers. Years ago, I enjoyed fishing Norway's Driva River, famous for its huge salmon. Sadly very few (if any!) salmon are sighted on the spawning beds today because of a parasitic disease (*Gyrodactylis salaris*). Other rivers are also tainted with this parasite and recently the Norwegians reluctantly poisoned the classic Laerdal River with the hope that in five years this river will recover sufficiently to support healthy Atlantic salmon.

The United States and Canada are no less vulnerable to acid rain despite the North American Clean Air Act that was implemented in 1990. Nova Scotia claims that "the salmon runs of 14 rivers in Nova Scotia's southern uplands have been killed by acid rain and another 50 rivers have been seriously impacted. These number will grow unless the Canadian and U.S. governments adopt stricter emission laws. . . ."

It's estimated that in another 20 years the demand for seafood will be increased by 700 percent! Aquaculture or fish farming may to be an answer; however, serious problems are associated with oceanic fish farming. They include the spreading of parasitic diseases, polluting the water from feed and fish wastes and the genetic dilution of wild fish. "Farmed" salmon, escaping from damaged pens or cages, breed with the wild fish and their offspring are not capable of surviving the rigors of migration.

Aquaculture is big business. One report estimates that more than 100 million people in the world make their living through aquaculture. In the United States fish farming (in freshwater ponds) is a huge industry

and its potential is enormous. Some experts predict that it will eventually surpass cattle ranching.

Unquestionably, aquaculture could be a valuable solution, but it is up to the angling community to insist on stringent controls and the reduction or elimination of the known problems.

The anti-fishing campaigns

The People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) has been actively involved in anti-fishing campaigns in Europe, because it considers angling cruel. In recent years, PETA brought its “trunk show” to the United States, to stop sportfishing at all costs. PETA—which claims a membership of more than 500,000—has mapped out numerous PR strategies and has established a network of protesters that is unbelievably persistent and testy.

But they cannot win. Or can they?

In the 1960s and early 1970s big-game hunters publicly discussed their safaris and shikars and even non-hunters admired them. Hollywood produced more than a dozen movies with hunting safari themes. Fashion and “shelter” magazines featured lavish pictorials of hunters’ trophy rooms. When the anti-hunting people stepped in, we chuckled at their initial awkward attempts, but today, a big-game hunter is reluctant to discuss his successes except with other hunters.

Can’t happen to angling? Ever hear of Pisces? Headquartered in Bristol, England, we knew this organization as Campaign for the Abolition of Angling (CAA), but in 1994 it changed its name to Pisces. Whereas PETA is a “horizontal” organization for the protection of all “animals” including fish, Pisces concentrates on fish and fishing, and among its goals is to ban angling everywhere. It has attained remarkable success in outlawing fishing on several European waters.

Pisces’ tentacles reach beyond sportfishing. As mentioned earlier, aquaculture or fish farming is an important food source that helps to feed the world’s population. Pisces strongly opposes fish farming for entirely different reasons than the spreading of parasitic diseases, pollu-

tion and genetic dilution. High on Pisces' agenda is a long-term project of brainwashing young students. Here are a few paragraphs from *Freda the Fish*, an essay that Pisces widely distributes among young students (while most of it relates to fish farming, Pisces doesn't miss the opportunity to slam angling and anglers):

"It was only the wire netting of the cage that separated Freda and her friends from the sea . . . When she was younger Freda would swim her way over to the netting and gaze longingly at the sea, dreaming, of swimming freely. . . ."

Later Freda and Felix escaped from the fish farm.

"'Owww. Help!' Felix suddenly cried. His lip was caught on a hook. He thrashed around in agony and Freda could only watch as he was dragged out of the water. . . ."

"She vaguely remembered being told about anglers . . . the only way she could console herself was with the thought that at least Felix had a few wonderful days of freedom before he had been so brutally killed."

By the way, how did Freda escape from the fish farm? There was a hole in the net, but she was too big to fit through it. So she thought it out. She quit eating for days, lost weight and escaped.

Anthropomorphism at its best. Hello. Bambi is back!

Pisces recommends that its members disrupt angling by any means, including throwing rocks in the water near fishermen, using scuba divers to cut lines in tournaments and other devilish tactics.

While in England a few years ago, I came across some Pisces members who were trying to disrupt a fishing tournament.

"Aren't you afraid that one of your members could be killed?" I asked a group of Pisces members. I was pretending to be an innocent bystander.

"Oh, but that's what we want! We need a martyr to carry on our work," the leader explained. Suddenly his eyes beamed with joy.

Other problems, other headaches

In the United States and Canada there are never-ending problems with the Native Fishing Rights. Illegal netting of salmon on both North Ameri-

can coasts have been well chronicled. In Minnesota and Wisconsin, Native Americans and sportsmen have clashed fiercely through the years. In Alaska, Native Americans were temporarily successful in closing several important fishing areas to visiting sportsmen. Every year there are violent conflicts—some resulting in bloodshed—involving Native Fishing Rights and sportsmen. While Native Fishing Rights were initiated in North America, the problem is spreading to other countries, including in New Zealand, where aboriginal tribes are disregarding fish and game laws.

Another important concern is that our young people are not taking up fishing at the same proportional rate as in previous generations. The competition from other activities plus the tremendous interest in computers and electronic devices are blamed. But what are we—the older generations—doing to interest our youth?

“I’ve never found any young person in serious trouble who had a strong interest in fishing and the outdoors,” says Dr. Ronald Trunsky, Michigan’s eminent psychiatrist and an ardent fisherman.

There are hundreds of other problems that confront sportfishing and fish on a regional, national and global basis.

Okay, so what do we do . . . take up golf?

One of our real problems is that the sportfishing community is fractured. We do not have a common voice. There are lots of clubs and associations, such as Trout Unlimited, Fly Fishing Federation, B.A.S.S., IGFA, The Billfish Foundation, Walleyes Unlimited, Muskies Inc., Atlantic Salmon Federation, American Museum of Fly Fishing, The National Fresh Water Fishing Hall of Fame, American Sportfishing Association, Izaak Walton, North American Fishing Club and hundreds more! Each, on its own, tries hard to solve its problems but, except for B.A.S.S., does not have the numbers that impress the politicians and governments.

We desperately need an umbrella organization or federation composed of the above groups, associations, clubs and anyone who has a stake in sport fishing.

Let's use **International Congress of Sportfishing (ICS)** strictly as a working title for this mythical federation.

In addition to the previously mentioned fishing clubs and associations, the strength, influence and success of the ICS lies in a multi-tiered structure of the various sportfishing segments.

Consider the outdoor/fishing magazines. *Salt Water Sportsman, Field & Stream, Sports Afield, Outdoor Life, Fly Fisherman, Marlin, Sport Fishing, In-Fisherman, Fly Fishing in Salt Waters, Atlantic Salmon Journal, Fly Rod and Reel, Bassmasters, Florida Sportsman* and all the rest of the fine angling publications would gain tremendously from the success of ICS. In many cases, ICS might be the most logical and perhaps the *only* road to survival: Could these publications survive if PETA, Pisces and other anti-fishing organizations achieve their goals? If commercial fishing destroys our oceans? If pollution continues to poison our lakes? If acid rain sterilizes our rivers? I don't think so.

The outdoor/fishing magazines would be a very important tier to ICS's success and, at the same time, protect their own existence.

What about the outdoor writers? The Outdoor Writers Association of America (OWAA) has about 1,700 members who write books, articles and newspaper columns. They host outdoor TV and radio programs, photograph and lecture. If we were to hire the best PR firms with a multi-million-dollar budget, it could not begin to compare with the job that all these outdoor writers could do for sportfishing.

How about the fishing tackle manufacturers? The giant mail-order tackle suppliers? Boat and outboard motor companies? The retail tackle stores? How about the fishing camps, and the fishing travel agencies? All should be encouraged to join. Again, their future is at stake.

Consider the enormous power anglers could have if these well-meaning but fractured, faint voices combined into one booming, ear-deafening, brain-rattling roar. Then, and only then, could we flex our muscles and get things done for sportfishing.

Let's look at two examples where the ICS' huge membership would make a substantial difference:

- 1) Facing a severe shortage of swordfish, The Billfish Foundation

started a campaign years ago to persuade restaurants to discontinue serving swordfish because this species is fighting for its survival. Right now, most of the swordfish served are juveniles that have never spawned. Despite limited PR efforts and letter writing, swordfish are featured on many restaurant menus and sold in super markets. Sure, The Billfish Foundation made a dent, but if members of the proposed ICS supported a Save our Swordfish (SOS) campaign, the general public would become aware of the shortage and quit ordering it. It would not matter whether the protesters in the SOS program are bass, trout, salmon, pike or tarpon fishermen; it matters only that we present a powerful, united angling front. Many feel that the swordfish's future is doomed and that efforts should concentrate on saving the marlin and sailfish.

2) Recently, Perrier—the giant bottled-water company—came close to establishing a plant at the Mekan River, one of Wisconsin's famous trout rivers. As an enticement, Perrier pointed out that this would mean lots of local jobs. It claimed that the water it would take from the Mekan would not damage the river or its fishing. *Ha!*

Thankfully, Friends of the Mekan, an association of several hundred sportsmen and naturalists, was quickly organized, and campaigned so vigorously that Perrier is prospecting elsewhere. If the ICS were in place and a membership alert was sounded, I'm sure that Perrier would have been so overwhelmed by the huge number of protests that it would have immediately looked for other waters to tap rather than conduct a long, bitter fight. Again, it wouldn't matter that we may not be trout fishermen or that we may never fish in Wisconsin. We are all anglers; we differ only in methods we choose, the species we seek.

The above are just two reasons why we need to lock arms and walk together.

Governments and politicians only pay attention to big numbers. Look at what the controversial National Rifle Association (NRA) accomplished in past decades. Very few candidates considered running for an important political office without "endorsing" the NRA. Why? Because the NRA has numbers. So why can't we apply the same "numbers" philosophy and make it work for fishing? There are twice as many fisher-

men as hunters in the United States. Just imagine the political power that angling would have through the International Congress of Sport-fishing.

The beauty of the proposed ICS is that every segment of the sport-fishing community stands to benefit from its existence. The fishermen. The writers. The magazines. The tackle manufacturers. The retail stores. The fishing travel agencies. And, most important, the fish!

But why would competitors in the outdoor/fishing fields join hands? The answer is simple: SURVIVAL! Let's look at the magazine segment for a moment. If the anti-fishing groups, like PETA and Pisces, convince the advertisers to cancel their ads, some angling magazines—if not all—would be out of business.

Ludicrous? Remember *The American Sportsman* (national TV series) hosted by Curt Gowdy? Every Sunday, sportsmen would gather around their television sets to watch Curt and Lee Wulff, and Stu Apte and Bing Crosby and others hunt or fish at some of the world's great destinations. The anti-hunting groups protested to the advertisers and soon *The American Sportsman* gave us hang gliding, cliff diving, surfing, mountain climbing and other non-hunting and non-fishing sports. *The American Sportsman?* Rest In Peace.

It is vital that we band together, that is, if we want to protect our waters and pass on fishing to future generations. **It's a win, win, win proposition.**

The Save our Sealife campaign, which limits marine net fishing in Florida state waters, is a great example of how angling groups and individuals can work together. The Save Our Sealife committee conducted a very effective petition drive on November, 10, 1992 by collecting 201,000 signatures outside the polling sites in Florida. This might be the most successful one-day petition effort ever in America. *Florida Sportsman*, its publisher Karl Wickstrom and the Florida Conservation Association were the important players in this fight, but they received tremendous assistance from many outdoor writers, numerous associations and federations, such as the Florida Wildlife Federation, Tropical Audubon Society of Miami, Sierra Club, Legal Defense Fund and oth-

ers. The result: An overwhelming victory on November 8, 1994, when 72 percent of the people voted to ban the nets. The formula for success included sportsmen, magazines, outdoor writers, grass roots campaigners and associations working together. While this worked to solve a regional problem, a similar model could be applied for national and international issues.

Once the ICS has been established in the United States, it must become international in scope because pollution, acid rain, over-harvesting of our oceans, anti-fishing campaigns and other problems are global issues. Going international would be relatively easy because nearly all the countries that offer fishing have associations or angling clubs in place and share similar concerns.

Until recently, the formation of ICS would have been extremely difficult, but today it can be activated quickly and inexpensively because of the Internet. There are thousands of fishing sites available right now that could be quickly linked but at the same time protect each site's sovereignty.

So what are some of the things that the International Congress of Sportfishing could accomplish via the Internet? Obviously, it would instantly open communication among all the fishing clubs, associations and members. Just think of the potential: fishing clubs around the world could chat on the Internet. The ICS could be in touch with millions of anglers without spending any money for printing and postage!

Another great advantage of the ICS/Internet is that anglers could easily communicate with local, state and federal governments. We all have good intentions to write to our representatives regarding various issues but we tend to put it off because writing a letter requires effort. With a few clicks on the computer keyboard we can instantly inform the government of our position on various sportfishing issues.

Who owns the International Congress of Sportfishing? Obviously there has to be a council or officers that gives the ICS direction. But we can take a page from the Internet: computers are linked together world wide but there are no owners of the Internet. Similarly, all fishing groups (associations, clubs, writers, tackle, etc.) could be linked together with

no particular owner. And while solving sport fishing problems is the most important *raison d'être* of ICS, there is the fun aspect, too. Fishing information could be exchanged between anglers from around the world.

How about holding an annual International Congress of Sportfishing World Symposium in a different country each year? That would surely be a wonderful dream come true.

If world organizations, associations, and individuals could not physically attend the ICS World Symposium they could participate—even vote on issues—via the Internet.

We need imagination and dream weavers in sportfishing.

We certainly have the talent in the United States and abroad to make this happen. We have highly successful business people who have built huge empires and know how to put the modules together. Some of them claim that they want to be “difference makers” in the environment. Well, here’s their opportunity. There are giants in television, Hollywood and in the entertainment field who love to fish. We have outstanding writers, artists and scientists who care what happens in our ocean, lakes and rivers. We have the expert anglers, such as Stu Apte, Lefty Kreh, Winston Moore, Billy Pate, Steve Sloan—hundreds of them—who can advise us. Great communicators like Bob Stearns, Mark Sosin, Bob McNally, Joe Doggett, Joan Wulff, John Randolph, Mike Leech to name a few. We are fortunate to have two former presidents, Jimmy Carter and George Bush, who are passionately involved in sportfishing (and wouldn’t they make wonderful presidents of the International Congress of Sportfishing?) The talent, the brains, the dream builders are all there. We need to develop an ICS concept: for the sake of fish, for the sake of fishing, and for the sake of future generations.