How to go about creating a fish-friendly atmosphere

BY PHILLIP GENTRY
FOR THE JOURNAL

Recently, a reader sent an email complimenting the addition of this outdoor column to The Journal, but on the back end of the compliment was a legitimate complaint.

Marcie J from Salem wrote, "I really enjoy reading your articles about fishing, and I keep hoping you might publish something that will help my husband and I catch fish from our dock.

"We live on Lake Keowee and have tried several times to catch fish in the afternoons now that the weather has gotten warmer. So far, we haven't had much luck. Any suggestions?"

The old adage that suggests 10 percent of the water holds 90 percent of the fish is pretty accurate. Bird enthusiasts understand that in order to attract that purple martin or hummingbird to their property, something has to be done to make the birds want to be there.

Birders who want to view purple martins place hollowed-out gourds on high poles and place brightly colored feeders filled with that sweet red liquid to attract hummingbirds.

You can do the same thing to your property to attract fish, assuming of course you live on or near the water.

Deer hunters are all too familiar with the offseason rituals of planting food plots and bush hogging their hunting grounds in order to create ideal habitat for deer. While it is possible to wander into the woods, pick a spot and take a deer without any prior preparation, preparing food sources greatly increases your chances of harvesting deer.

The fisherman who takes the same approach as the deer hunter greatly increases his chances for success.

Presumably, the reason we always see bass boats zooming across the lake is that the anglers driving the boat are moving from one fish-populated spot to another. Shore-bound anglers, of which dock fishermen comprise a large percentage, don't have the luxury of moving to the fish, so they have to bring the fish to them.

That will take some preparation. By way of preparing, anglers who create their own personal fish holding structure are more likely to be successful in catching fish.

Fish are widely known to be structure-oriented animals. The structure can be in many forms — stumps, rocks, weeds, bridge pilings, blowdowns, even the boat dock itself. Any area that provides the fish a place to lie in wait for an easy meal is likely to hold fish at some point.

The best thing that a boat dock provides to a fish is shade. Fish don't have eyelids, so any shady spot can be to their liking if other variables are also present.

The first variable is water depth. In a clear-water lake like Keowee, fish need several feet of water in order to feel comfortable. Water depth typically isn't a problem since the terrain easily accommodates deep water near the shoreline.

Ten to 15 feet of water is ideal, deeper is OK and shallower can still be OK, so long as fish don't spook away from the dock anytime someone steps foot on it.

The other variable is cover. Cover can be any underwater material that affords the fish some place to both ambush prey and stay hidden from larger predators. If you think about it in human terms, the cover provides food and "clothing" while the dock provides shelter.

One of the best methods of creating manmade cover is by sinking materials under and around the dock. Manmade cover can be effective in any depth, and it's wise to create it at a range of depths from as deep as 30 feet to up to just a couple of feet.

It's a good idea to place cover both under and around the dock, keeping it within a reasonable casting distance of 20 yards to accommodate a variety of depths.

Many different materials can be used for cover, including old Christmas trees, bamboo canes, PVC piping and tree limbs.



PHILLIP GENTRY | FOR THE JOURNAL

Lake homeowners wanting to catch fish from their docks can take steps to make their property more fish-friendly.

Lakefront property owners are constantly cleaning up fallen tree limbs and even whole trees after severe weather, then are tasked with where and how to dispose of it.

Once created, it's wise to mark your fish attractors by triangulating their position with large unmovable objects on the opposite shoreline so you'll know where to cast your baits.

Marking your brush with a floating jug works fine for farm ponds or other lakes with limited access, otherwise others will assist you in fishing your hard-earned spots. Dock-mounted rod holders pointing out into the water are another dead giveaway.

Now the final question is, "How do I catch the fish once they take up residence around my dock?"

Now there's a good subject for future columns.