'Cause that's where the fish are!

Recent controversy over bridge fishing reminds us about reason to fish off span — and it has something to do with 'Willie Sutton's law'

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SUN FILE PHOTO BY SCOTT LAWSON

The U.S. 41 bridges over the Peace River spanning from Punta Gorda to Charlotte Harbor.

WATERLINE PHOTO BY SCOTT LAWSON

The Florida Department of Transportation had enacted new rules forbidding fishing from the bridges over the Peace River along U.S. 41. Those rules have been changed and sign taken down and replaced with a reminder of a "No Littering" law.

Like many of my fellow anglers, I was more than a little shocked when FDOT closed the U.S. 41 bridge to fishing. Boaters have long known that the bridge is a good fishing spot.

But things changed for land-based anglers after the last few hurricane seasons. Storms damaged many popular fishing access points around the Harbor, leaving the remaining locations increasingly congested. Anglers naturally turned to the U.S. 41 bridge.

Word got out. A huge stretch of good angling evolved into a popular fishing destination. That's good news for the community and businesses that depend on fishing, recreation, and tourism. The bridge has become everything I think its planners wanted — a multiuse causeway, pedestrian and bicycling route, observation corridor and now a regional recreational asset.

It comes with a cost. Like all multiuse facilities, conflicts inevitably arise. I gather that the chief complaint was littering. Yep, fishing isn't the cleanest sport, but good sportsmen pick up their trash. It's not just unsightly; it can become a highway safety issue and a hazard to pedestrians.

People walking or biking the bridge don't appreciate dead bait, abandoned catches, hooks, fishing line, abandoned buckets, lawn chairs! — the list is long.

It was a relief to see the signage change, whether through wisdom or public outcry, from "No Fishing" to "No Littering." I was worried Charlotte County might secede from the state. I mean, the RIGHT TO FISH is one of those natural laws that even our Constitution shouldn't need to point out.

So why fish from a bridge at all?

Kind of reminds me of "Willie Sutton's law," named after the famous bank robber who supposedly explained why he robbed banks: "Because that's where the money is."

Same with fishing bridges: Cause that's where the fish are!

But why are the fish there in the first place? And it's not just the U.S. 41 bridge. The same thing happens around I-75, El Jobean, canal bridges and old railroad trestles.

As with most ecological situations, the answer isn't simple. It depends on the fish, bridge, and conditions, but we can generalize it into one equation:

Fish = tide + current + structure + food + shade + predator behavior.

Of course, an angler's skill, knowledge, and luck still count, but none explains why the fish are there — unless someone is chumming.

Bridges and their structures change the nearby ecology by altering currents and providing structure, shade and food.

Bridges are often located by design to relatively narrow crossings. Pilings, abutments, channels, and shoreline modifications further constrict, redirect tidal and river flow creating turbulence. Water accelerates through some areas and slows in others, producing a patchwork of depths, currents, bottom conditions, eddies and habitats.

Fishing around a bridge is often best when the tide is moving. Predators can hold in relatively quiet water behind pilings while waiting for prey to come to them rather than wasting energy chasing food in open water. Weaker swimmers and drifting organisms—baitfish, shrimp, larval animals, small crabs, plankton, and organic debris—are carried along by the current.

The same thing happens downstream of a fallen tree, snag, oyster bar, or large rock. A bridge is all those things on steroids.

Bridge structures also provide habitat. Underwater concrete, pilings, rocks, and riprap quickly become colonized. Algae and microorganisms form the base of a community of grazers, filter feeders, and predators. Crabs, shrimp, amphipods, barnacles, mussels, oysters, sponges, tube worms, and other invertebrates occupy these hard surfaces.

And where there is food, fish are usually nearby.

Blennies, gobies, killifish, pinfish, pigfish, spot, and mullet mingle with larger fish such as black drum, snook, trout, redfish, sheepshead, tarpon, and sharks. When fishing a bridge, it can be a mystery what you might pull up next. Bridges function as super artificial reefs.

Shade adds another dimension. Beneath a bridge it provides concealment, while predators may use the distinct boundary between light and darkness to ambush prey. Temperatures can be moderated and prey can hide shadows to hide.

Then there are the eddies. As currents pass around pilings, wakes form behind them. Fish can hold there while expending less energy, facing into the current and waiting for food to arrive. A predator needs to accelerate only a short distance to grab passing prey rather than constantly fighting the current. That's why letting your bait drift naturally around a piling might yield a prize fish. During slack tide, this delivery system slows and fishing success usually diminishes.

The ecological principle is simple: obtain food while spending as little energy as possible. Not unlike our fast-food drive throughs when you're hungry or in a hurry.

Nature's bridge food chain is driven by current and physical factors:

plankton, invertebrates and drifting material → baitfish → larger predators → hopefully, our catch.

The principle of conserving energy sometimes applies to the angler as well. Next time a boater with twin 250-hp outboards brags about all the fish they caught under the bridge, consider their energy cost compared with dropping a line over the side and sitting comfortably in your lawn chair while potentially catching the same fish.

Night fishing from a bridge is a different experience. Bridge and roadway lights illuminate patches of water and can concentrate plankton and small fish, which in turn attract larger predators. Add cool bay breezes, calmer waters, starry or moonlit skies, quieter traffic, and often more dedicated anglers, and you understand why some fishermen prefer bridges after dark.

While bridges can function as artificial reefs, they are not necessarily environmentally friendly. They place massive structures where natural estuarine habitats once existed and can alter currents, shorelines and habitat. Litter, traffic, noise, artificial light, nuisant insects, bird kills, runoff, and changes in water flow are among their potential environmental impacts.

Still, their pilings, shoreline hardening, flow constriction, shade, and underwater surfaces work together to create conditions that make bridges productive fishing locations. They cannot replace what mangroves, oyster reefs, seagrass beds, and natural shorelines provide.

But they can provide habitat while serving transportation, recreation, exercise, evacuation, economic activity—and some great fishing too.

I can't imagine Southwest Florida without these causeways and bridges, and I'm glad to see the fishing public taking advantage of them.

That privilege comes with a simple responsibility: enjoy the bridge, catch some fish, and when you leave, make sure your fishing spot is as clean — or cleaner — than you found it.

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