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HEADLINE: LEARNING THE LANGUAGE OF LOCAL FISHING

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BODY:

The voice spoke English words, but they made no sense to me.

"By you dough back," it said. "By you dough grease. Deys bitin under dem birs. On chart ruse kaka hoes. Green. And french fried worms."

One phone call into my first southeast Louisiana fishing report and things had already gone awry. My fingers remained poised above the keyboard, ready to take down anything intelligible. My brain clicked through vocabulary accumulated from years of angling in the northeast United States, looking in vain for similarities. Inside, I was beginning to panic. French fried worms? Did he say french fried worms?

I realized the voice had stopped. I hesitated, unsure how to proceed. Should I tell Sydney Anderson, one of the grouchiest marina operators in the metropolitan area, that I couldn't understand a word he was saying? Should I call in a translator? Should I run home to Philadelphia whimpering?

I thanked Sydney hopelessly and started typing.

About two hours later, I presented a finished copy of the week's fishing report to Bob Marshall, The Times-Picayune's outdoors editor. I could have been handing him an ancient cuneiform tone poem or the code for the Melissa Virus. I had no idea what was on that paper. Needless to say, I had some concern he might get angry.

Angry is not what he got.

"Ho ho ho ho," Bob said. "Ho ho ho ho ho."

When he finished reading the more hilarious bits to anyone he could grab nearby, or reach by telephone -- my editors, my parents, the guys in payroll, some guys on the corner -- Bob took out a pen and started marking my printout.

"It's not Big Jamboree, it's Big Chene Fleur," he said. "It's not sheep head, it's sheepshead. And I'm not even going to talk about how you spelled Cox Bay."

My first painful lesson in the unique culture of Louisiana fishing required four hours of time, three cups of coffee and approximately 30 phone calls. By the next week, I had decided I'd gotten off easy. I learned then that the fishing reports are best done at the exact hour the anglers depart for open water. That hour varies during the year between about 5 and 6 a.m.

The next Thursday, fishing report day, I rolled out of bed in the morning with a sense of anticipation. This time I was prepared. When Sydney finished reciting his list of incomprehensible words that might have been the names of fishing locations and might have been varieties of frozen bait shrimp, I knew what to do.

"Ummm, could you spell that?" I asked.

"Spell what?" said Sydney.

OK. Beaten twice. Had to regroup. Digging into the computer archives, I began to read fishing reports from years past. They weren't quite as gripping as the latest Harry Potter. They pretty much read like some of the slower sections of the government listings. But over time, they described an ancient biological story -- a reality-based soap opera about the lives of game fish and the people who catch them.

The fishing report really provides a sort of shorthand to describe the yearly changes of the Louisiana coastline. It's like watching the food chain in action -- last week, for example, a large number of speckled trout chased shrimp onto Baladour Reef. The shrimp were driven to the surface, where sea birds began diving from the air to feed on them. Anglers saw the gulls and caught the fish.

But understanding what was happening didn't improve my spelling. I thought that after I'd been fishing, I'd understand more. But even traveling into the marsh didn't help me learn the names of the lakes and bayous. Coastal erosion has transformed every puddle in the salt marsh into a small lake bordered by grass. An aerial photograph of say, the region around Reggio, shows thousands of small bodies of these lakes. Some were named by original settlers. Some bear the names of the photographer's cats.

I began establishing a routine for the fishing report: Get up at 5 a.m., have coffee, make the calls. Sleep two hours. Complain. Then bring the report to work and double-check the place names against a map. Baits and fish species grew easy as I gained experience. I learned to spell "gaspergou." I learned to understand Sydney's accent.

I even learned to enjoy the mellifluous local names for various bodies of water. Names like "Lake Coquille," "Baptiste Collette," and my personal favorite, "Grand Caillou Bayou."

One day, I discovered you could rearrange the fishing reports and sing them to the tune of the theme from "Gilligan's Island." That's how you know when you're a GOOD outdoors reporter. Here's an example, from the last week's almanac:

Thorn Tree and Bayou Dos Gris, Lake of Two Trees, Dulac/The locks, the rocks, the shoreline of Cox, from Unknown to Pass Manchac/From Unknown to Pass Manchac.

Great. Now I had the fishing reports stuck in my head all day long.

But the scariest realization came when I was fishing with friends and one of them wanted to go to Lake Amadee, because the fishing report had said there were redbfish in Lake Amadee. I wanted to go to Lake Borgne. I had good reasons for thinking there might be fish in Lake Borgne. But he didn't believe me. We argued. Finally, he threw up his hands.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm just going to have to believe the fishing report over you."