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A fresh APPROACH; Retiree Al Dusang likes his fishing simple and easy, so he prefers fresh shrimp to a collection of baits when fresh shrimp is readily available

By Aaron Kuriloff; Staff writer

Al Dusang doesn't like to work that hard. And to a retiree like him, running around all day chasing fish sounds a lot like hard work.

Dusang, who owns Lake Hermitage Marina, prefers letting the fish do the work while he relaxes. So he has a recipe designed to create that particular set of circumstances: a pole, a cork, a cold drink and some fresh shrimp.

"Some people like to move all day," he said. "Not me. I like to let fish come to me."

When Dusang goes fishing, fresh shrimp is the only bait in the boat. He grabs handfuls from the trawlers that pass his front porch on their way in and out of this condensed, if busy, fishing village.

He never leaves the dock without at least five pounds. He never comes home without fish.

"I look for them glassy eyes," he said, fitting a particularly glassy-eyed specimen onto a hook. "The fish look for that. They can tell the difference. I don't know if they got radar or what. But they can tell."

Fishing with only fresh shrimp for bait is like golfing with only one club -- technically possible, but not generally considered smart play. Anglers tend to carry about 15 pounds of tackle at all times, operating on the theory that it is better to have and not need, than to need and not have.

Dusang's theory goes: if you only need one thing, then that's all you have to carry.

Some would prefer live shrimp. But Dusang insists fresh shrimp works just as well. It catches speckled trout. It catches redfish. It catches drum, white trout, croaker, ladyfish, stingrays and catfish. It's angling's equivalent to throwing a handful of cash in the air and yelling "up for grabs."

The indiscriminate lure of the bait means, on most days, fresh shrimp would be an angler's second or third choice: if you run out of live minnows, try fresh shrimp. If the Deadly Dudley isn't, throw on some shrimp. And, given the profusion of live shrimp in the estuarine marshes of southeast Louisiana, most anglers place somewhat less value on dead ones.

Unusual habits

But Dusang isn't most anglers. The 60 year old retired to Lake Hermitage two years ago, and bought the marina from his friend, Kenny Morrison, because it worked out cheaper than buying a camp in the same location. Now he fishes at least three times a week and has learned every pocket between the lake and the Gulf of Mexico.

Owning the marina gave him a ready supply of fresh shrimp -- the preferred bait of his childhood. And the effects of practice and experience means, boy, does he catch fish.

The only problem: people keep expecting him to work. Some have even asked him to stock other kinds of bait at the marina.

"Lots of people want me to handle live shrimp and cockahoos," he said. "If had them down here, I'd have to work harder. And what happens if I run out and you've driven all the way down here? Now you got nothing. It's not worth it. Let them stop at Captain Larry's down the road on their way in."

Besides, he said, you don't need any other kind of bait. Just fresh shrimp.

Works for everything

His proof swam about 500 yards from the marina. Dusang, talking the whole time, attached a cork to his line, tossed it toward shore and reeled in a black drum. Another cast, another black drum.

"I could sit here all day and reel these in just for fun, but we should go catch some specks," he said.

So he did. It's easy when you know where to go. Dusang can predict which fish are swimming in each hole.

"I know just about 'em all," he said. "People pass up these spots. They want to go ride, ride, ride. They don't know that the fish are right here."

Neither Dusang, nor his 20-year-old boat, care for the effort. He also doesn't care for plastic lures (too expensive), newer boats (waste of money) or outboard motors built in the past 10 years (why bother?). And despite the popularity of bottom fishing on southeast Louisiana's shallow waters, he reserves a particular disdain for that practice.

"With a cork, you don't wear yourself out," he said. "With plugs, you're always reeling. People use all kinds of things. But I been fishing a long time, and I don't think I'll ever be doing no bottom fishing."

Yet, despite habits that would drive a charter guide insane, Dusang catches fish. Everywhere he goes.

"I know my tides," he said. "When they're high, the fish will come in here, and when they're low, they'll go in there. I listen too. People want to come out and listen to their music. But I heard that last fish popping, turned around and boom, caught me a few."

If he decides the bait isn't fresh enough, he chases down a trawler and picks up some more. Not many will begrudge a 60-year-old man a few handfuls of shrimp. He uses the old ones for chum, tossing them into the current to attract fish, then sending his hook in behind. In every spot he explores, he catches a few fish.

Then a few more. After about three hours of relatively constant action, Dusang decided to pick up some redfish for dinner. He pulled up to a shoreline and cast twice.

Then he reeled in a redfish.

"See how quick he hit that cork," Dusang said. "Now, tell me you can't catch 'em good on fresh bait."

Point made, cooler full, he headed back to shore.

At the dock, he met a small group of anglers heading in from a slow morning. He suggested they try fishing with fresh shrimp. Then he started pulling fish out of his ice chest and placing them on a cleaning table.

The others gathered around to look. Dusang enjoyed the moment -- the triumph of age and intractability over technology and conventional wisdom.

"I been fishing this way all my life," he said. "I don't figure I'm going to change now."

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