

One Man's Trash

Carp, drum, buffalo and other bottom feeders caught by the net load constitute treasure for some fishermen in northern waters

By Mike Suchan



Tim Adams (right) makes a big haul of 10,000 pounds of buffalo. Richard Carlson photo

PEPIN, Wis. – To make his living, Tim Adams takes out the trash. As in trash fish -- the carp, drum, buffalo and other species most anglers don't target with line and hook, nor flour and oil.

Adams is totally entangled with these bottom feeders, has been for half his life. The 36-year-old who lives in Wabasha, Minn., not only nets them several days a week out of his 30-foot Lund johnboat, but he manages the plant across the Mississippi River in Pepin where these fish are processed and packaged.

"I try to quit every day," he says of being inside the walls of the Clear Springs Fish Company. "Now, I was thrown into this job. I never asked for it. I never wanted it, but here I am. I've been doing it for six years, and I've tried quitting, but I can't quit."

Maybe he's got too much fish oil in his blood. His life revolves around fish and the "big haul," whether it's going after trash fish with a seine net, competing on a walleye tournament series or overseeing the processing and shipping of thousands of pounds of fish each week.

There are around 10 commercial net fishermen who ply this stretch of the upper Mississippi River and the region's lakes, delivering fish to the plant for pennies on the pound. A 1,000-pound boatload might earn \$150, so trash doesn't equal great treasure. It's more hard work. The life isn't for everyone, maybe just those few wired so roughly.

"It's fun," Adams says at the plant. "I thrive. I gotta be busy. I gotta always be, all day long, every day. If I ain't in here, I'm on the river doing, or at home doing. I don't like stopping."



Trays of carp are being flash frozen in the minus-20-degree unit at Tim Adams' fish plant. Mike Suchan photo

Circle of life

Another who's hard to stop is fellow commercial fisherman Mike Johnson of Pepin. After a night of tending bar at Ralph's Bar and Mary's Kitchen, he goes out most mornings to retrieve whatever's in his mile of nets. The gill nets, which have a lead line to sink it to the bottom and a buoy line to float its coverage 10 feet up, are placed strategically in waterways where fish most likely will move.



“Basically fish are swimming, so if you get in there where they are, they’re going to swim into that net. Some are, some ain’t,” says Johnson, who works six 500-foot sections, each with his name emblazoned on the buoys. “There’s no real perfect rhyme or reason to them.”

“Basically it’s all by hand. It’s buoyed so you can see where it is and other people can see where it is. It looks like a huge mess and it can kind of be a mess, but for us, it’s like riding a bike.”

After muscling in the net and fish, Johnson heads off to the plant. Pulling up to the loading dock, he now separates his fish from the netting. Wearing blue rubber gloves that are a staple in the industry, Johnson uses a tool with a short metal hook on a handle to yank the netting over the fish bodies, snapping pieces in the process.

“It doesn’t have any stretch to it like that regular monofilament,” he said. “It’s actually like eight individual webs twisted together. Because it’s twisted together it has no stretch, it has no give. It mostly just breaks when the fish is too big. After so long, you’re going to wear the net out. If you’re fishing hard, a year. Maybe half a year if you’re really catching fish, a lot of carp. Carp are tough on nets.”

His crew throws the fish, as well as a pair of snapping turtles, into buckets on the loading dock as plant workers separate the species into large rolling bins. They get weighed and iced. Johnson waits for the final tally to get his daily bread. He might rest a bit before putting out more nets, then clean up for another night moonlighting at the bar.

Adams and Johnson, two of the subjects of an Outdoor Channel reality show “Bottom Feeders,” need commercial fishing licenses specific to fish both Wisconsin and Minnesota, as well as another for inland bodies of water, and their mates need an apprentice license. The states require fees of \$5 per 100 foot of gill net and \$9 each 100 feet of seine. For a year, all the licenses might run around \$500.

Carp dime

Common carp are the lowest priced fish, going for 10 cents a pound. Catfish might get 50 cents a pound. Buffalo, for its whiter meat, have gained in popularity and garner somewhere in between.

While most towns have a “Catfish House” restaurant of some kind, eateries that specialize in carp or buffalo are few and far between. Most Americans consider them trash fish and won’t consider eating them, but carp and similar rough fish have a big market overseas, and in select U.S. cities.

“Carp is like the No. 1 source of protein in the world,” Adams says. “It’s just another fish.”



Workers at the fish plant make quick work of slicing up and boxing carp. (Mike Suchan photo)

Adam's plant is among the 100 suppliers to Schafer Fisheries, which sells about 30 million pounds of fish each year. Schafer, with facilities in Fulton and Thomson, Ill., is the Midwest's largest processor and wholesale/retail distributor of fresh fish and frozen seafood. Most of the bottom feeders are sent out to major U.S. cities with ethnic populations, Eastern Europe and Asia, sales manager Steven McNitt said.

"In the U.S., a lot of these fish go to Asian people and it's the preferred fish for most people from the Eastern Bloc Russian countries," he says. "If it wasn't for the ethnic people, we probably couldn't market carp in the U.S. The big reason most Americans don't eat it is they don't want to deal with the bones."

Carp have an abundance of intramuscular bones. There are some restaurants that score carp and deep fry it, disintegrating the bones. But McNitt said that only works on smaller fish, not those 10- to 50-pounders Adams and Johnson capture in their 8-inch netting, which allows smaller sport fish to escape.

Common yellow carp is a food staple in Europe. Anglers there have targeted them for years and there's a major carp fishing tournament scene, an extensive of which is now increasing in America.

Not many Americans choose carp for a father/son outing followed by a fish fry, but Schafer promises to process rough fish any way "the customer wants." They sell whole fish, fresh or frozen and cut filets and steaks.

Adams has a team making quick work of hefty carp with a band saw, slicing each into four or five chunks, some of which make their way to the minus 20-degree flash freezer. McNitt says Schafer also makes fish hot dogs, salami, jerky and gifelte fish. Their web site offers a Smoked Carp Chunk of 1 pound for \$5.25.

Somebody's buying it. Adams plant moves 12,000 to 15,000 pounds of carp each week. The demand rises dramatically around the holidays, McNitt says, as it's a traditional Christmas dinner for Polish people.

"My demand probably triples during the holidays," he says. "The Poles buy 300,000 pounds of carp in December and most of that goes to Chicago and Detroit."

Renewable resource

Thirty million pounds a year sounds like a lot of the resource, but that's spread over a wide region, including the Land of 10,000 Lakes. Neil Vanderbosch of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, who monitors the region around Pepin, isn't overly concerned with trash fish.



Tim Adams signals to Minnesota Department of Natural Resources personnel that he's completing setting out his nets for a fish survey. Mike Suchan photo

"Nobody really cares," Vanderbosch says. "We'd have to go out to do study, but it seems to be fairly stable. We're more concerned with their bycatch."

Vanderbosch works as a fisheries program consultant who keeps an eye on commercial fisherman. They submit monthly catch reports to him, and their numbers have been down in recent years.

“They’ve had their heyday, harvesting 6 to 7 million pounds. Lately, it’s only 2 to 3 million pounds a year,” he says.

Besides wanting sport fish to evade nets or be thrown back alive, bycatch worries include the invasive Asian carp, and the state is working to study paddlefish and sturgeon to keep them around. Adams, for one, and his nets are used by state biologists conducting fish surveys.

“We hire him to look more for Asian carp,” says Vanderbosch, who adds Adams might help them clean out lakes of the trash fish. “We used to have our own crews, when common carp really started taking over lakes. We went out and tried to get most of them out of the lakes. It wasn’t cost effective for us. It’s not a long-term solution for rough fish control ... until you can stop them from coming back in.”

The theory is the bottom feeders affect sport fishing, muddying the water and preventing plant growth. The body of water is altered where the trash fish take over.

“They re-suspend the sediment that’s on the bottom, in the process, it makes the water very dirty and releases a lot of nutrients. The light can’t reach into the water to grow plants,” said Dan Dieterman, a river biologist in Lake City, Minn. “The water becomes pea green soup with all the suspended silt and sediments, and the fish community changes from sight oriented to more bottom feeding.

“In some of our inland waters, some of our lakes that are really small, they will contract with a commercial fisherman to come in and remove the bottom feeders.”

Although there are other factors involved, the general concept is removing the mass of rough fish improves the water for sport fish.

Glad to do it

Adams has been up for the task. Last winter, he had a major catch that required tractor trailers -- that’s plural -- to haul it off over two days. His crew drove their equipment onto an iced over 15,000-acre lake southwest of Minneapolis, chopped holes and sent their nets out with submersibles.

The nets were drawn in toward their “dipper,” a big hydraulic fish scoop, and Adams was standing in the hole surrounded by fish when he responded to a

voicemail. With a whole heaping of Minnesota amicability and a real “you-betcha” attitude, he politely asked if he can get back later.



Tim Adams takes a call while standing among 300,000 pounds of rough fish. (Courtesy Tim Adams)

“Yeah, seining right now,” he says. “Five below zero. Standing in a pair of waders. Eight guys and one lady stacking net. A couple hundred thousand pounds of fish in the net. We’re going to murder them. Lots of them.”

His crew separated the fish and boxed them right there on the two-foot thick ice. An 18-wheeler on shore was loaded up with live buffalo for a trip to New York City. The big haul required another four semi-tractor trailers, all going to Schafer.

“You normally don’t catch a couple hundred thousand pounds, but today was a good day. Tomorrow we’ll empty out that bag and know what we got for fish,” Adams says.

The buffalo, carp and white carp totaled 200,000 pounds, half of which were the pricier buffalo, so a treasure-like payday was in the offing. It’s the kind of catch Adams lives for, what keeps him going in sub-zero temps, in fish up to his armpits, in blazing heat, in rain and rough water.

Dieterman agrees the life isn’t for everybody.

“I’ve grown up in this area and I actually worked for a commercial fisherman,” he said. “It’s very fascinating. Obviously, there’s some colorful characters out there.

For a lot of these commercial guys, they like to be on the water and they like to harvest fish.

“A lot of them, I don’t know if they have a good business sense, but Tim definitely has a very good business sense. He’s running one of Schafer’s markets. He’s doing well for himself.”

Because he gets to “keep doing,” because he’s on the water fishing, living from nature’s resources, Adams seems happy. Just as long as he gets out of those damned walls of the fish plant.

“I tried going fishing full time and telling (the boss) I quit,” Adams said, “but he keeps sending me my paycheck, so here I am. So I keep running the place.”

Eh, it’s a living.