

## COLUMN ONE

### Fishing's Lure Lost on Young

*The family-friendly pastime can't compete with busy schedules and higher-octane sports. Devoted anglers look for ways to reel in new fans.*

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The bright yellow and gray fishing lines perform slowmotion shimmies in midair before whipping out onto a shallow pond in front of the clubhouse of the Long Beach Casting Club.

It's early evening, and overhead stadium lights illuminate half a dozen middle-aged and elderly anglers practicing fly casts. The light gives the dancing lines a magical glow.

Former club president Jeff Sadler stands on the porch of the Craftsman-style clubhouse and points out the obvious: "The occupation of the average member is 'retired.' "

Inside the clubhouse, where a fly-tying class is in session, the demographics aren't much different. Seth Averill Murphy, 11, is the only youth among two dozen or so adults hunched over wooden tables, wrapping thread and feathers around insect-size hooks.

It's also a common scene at lakes, streams and ponds. Fishing is losing its appeal to America's youngsters. As a result, the sport is foundering, dropping in popularity behind bowling and working out at the gym.

Fishing once was a venerable pastime, passed on from father to son and grandfather to grandson. Today, desperate lake operators, fishing clubs and tackle manufacturers are funding youth fishing programs in a losing effort to reel in the next generation of anglers.

Blame the 70-hour workweek and the proliferation of two-income households, trends that cut into fishing time. Blame after-school activities and part-time jobs that keep youngsters away from the serene sport. And blame teens who are bored by the prospect of landing a bigmouth bass from a secluded lake cove or hooking a feisty brown trout from a rock-lined creek in the Eastern Sierra.

"What's going on? You name it, it's going on," said Mike Nussman, president of the American Sportfishing Assn., a Virginia-based trade group that funds several programs for young anglers. "Look at the way people live their lives these days. There is tremendous competition for their time."

At the Long Beach pond, Sadler, a retired computer processor with salt-and-pepper hair, watches the graceful casts and recalls how his father and grandfather taught him to fly-fish in the lakes and streams near his boyhood home in Kansas.

But when Sadler became a father, he said, he couldn't pass his love of fishing on to his son, who preferred fast-paced pursuits like water skiing and mountain biking.

"Fishing never came up high on his list," Sadler said.

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President Hoover once described fishing as "the great occasion when we can return to the fine simplicity of our forefathers." Norman Rockwell memorialized fishing with paintings that depict a doting father, a fishing cap on his head and a pole in his hand, teaching his eager son to fish.

But after a boom in popularity in the four decades following World War II, sport fishing began to fall out of favor, according to surveys and fishing license sales.

A 2004 survey by the National Sporting Goods Assn. found that participation in fishing dropped 10% from 1994 to 2004 and was surpassed in popularity for the first time by camping, bowling and exercising with gym equipment.

In 1994, 45.7 million Americans said they fished at least once. That number dropped to 41.2 million in 2004, according to the survey. By comparison, 52.2 million Americans said they worked out with gym equipment in 2004 and 43.8 million bowled that year, the survey found.

Freshwater fishing, the sport in which most youngsters learn the basic skills, has suffered the steepest decline, while saltwater fishing has remained relatively stable. Fishing conditions ebb and flow each year, and industry officials say there is no proof that the sport's decline is due to a lack of fish.

Some anglers secretly celebrate the sport's decline, rejoicing in the smaller crowds they encounter at the best fishing spots. But fishing clubs and park rangers warn that the long-term effects on the sport could be devastating.

A drop in fishing license revenue and tackle sales means less funding for government-run habitat restoration programs and state hatcheries that stock lakes and streams. Sport fishing, a \$116-billion industry, is also the economic engine that sustains many small towns in the Eastern Sierra.

The decline has varied from state to state. California, second only to Florida in generating retail sales and tax revenues from fishing, has had one of the steepest declines, with license sales dropping 15% from 1994 to 2004.

Fewer anglers also means fewer outdoor activists.

"People who fish care for their lakes and streams," said Bob Wiltshire of the Federation of Fly Fishers, a Montana-based nonprofit group. "We will lose that direct connection."

And then there are the social consequences of the decline. Surveys show that the top two reasons people fish are to have fun and to spend time with family and friends. Catching a fish is near the bottom of the list. Fishing, then, is a social event, a family bonding experience that is on the wane.

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Surrounded by rolling hills and lush green oaks, Lake Casitas, on the outskirts of Ojai, is a picturesque body of forest-green water with a reputation as one of the state's best bass fishing spots. But in the last 25 years, the number of anglers visiting the 2,700-acre lake has dropped by more than 50%.

Lake manager Brian Roney can recognize the problem to his own family.

Listen to Roney's 17-year-old daughter, Heather, describe fishing: "It's sitting unproductively waiting for something to happen." Besides, she said, she doesn't have time for it. She has a part-time job at a shoe store and choir and swim practice.

Roney's 13-year-old son, Spencer, shares his sister's view. "You just put your line in the water and wait for something to happen," he said disdainfully. He prefers playing basketball, riding mountain bikes and surfing the Internet.

Such talk disheartens Roney — as a father and as a lake manager.

He struggles to replace the revenue lost to dwindling boat rentals and bait sales. To attract more anglers, he is considering allowing visitors to fish without a state license, a move that would incur the wrath of the state Department of Fish and Game, which relies on license revenue to stock the lake with trout and bass. The department could respond by ending future allocations of fish at Lake Casitas and requiring the lake to apply for a \$557 aquaculture license.

At a recent meeting of Southern California lake operators near Hemet, Roney predicted a dark future unless operators and government officials launch dramatic efforts to draw in new anglers. "I think it's a dying industry," he told his colleagues, some of whom nodded in silence.

At home, six fishing rods hang in Roney's garage, collecting dust. Roney worries that the sport he loved as a boy won't be passed on to his children.

When Roney was 8, his grandfather taught him to fish during overnight boating trips off San Pedro. He has fond memories of catching halibut, rock cod and an occasional shark.

When his children were old enough, Roney taught them to fish during family vacations. But in the years since, they have shown no interest in the sport, even though they have year-round access to one of the best fishing lakes in the state.

"I don't see the next generation of anglers coming up through the system," he said.

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Despite the declining numbers, most youngsters are not averse to picking up a rod and reel if given the chance, said Mark Damian Duda, executive director of Responsive Management, a Virginia-based survey research firm that has conducted studies on sport fishing's decline. The problem, he said, is that parents and children have such busy schedules that few have time for fishing.

"A lot of kids want to fish and want to be with parents," he said. But "without Dad grabbing them and saying 'Let's go fishing,' it's not going to happen."

But Duda's research also finds that a segment of youngsters — about 20% of those polled — say they don't fish because they consider it a bore.

This attitude may explain why other outdoor activities, such as camping and hiking, continue to grow in popularity while fishing declines. Lake operators and club leaders wonder if fishing's methodical pace is too slow for today's multi-tasking youngsters.

Such a theory rings true to Jill Grigsby, a Pomona College sociology professor and expert on families and population trends.

"Today's young people grew up with a lot of stimulation and seeing images that appear on the screen for only a couple of seconds, and that is not the way fishing works," she said. "Fishing requires a great deal of patience."

In hopes of drawing young people back, fishing groups, lake operators and park rangers are sponsoring free children's fishing clinics and fishing gear loan programs, among other activities.

At Lake Casitas, Roney and his staff try to entice youngsters each year with a Kids' Fishing Day. The event, scheduled this year for March 18, includes a live fish plant, a casting contest, fishing lessons, raffles and a free hot dog lunch.

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Inside the wood-paneled clubhouse at the Long Beach Casting Club, Seth Averill Murphy is the embodiment of hope for a sport that is aging out. The 11-year-old sits in the front row at the fly-tying class as a gray-haired man with bifocals shows how to tie copper-colored thread and peacock and pheasant feathers around tiny hooks. Seth's tongue arches out of his mouth as he concentrates on his work in progress, a fly called a pheasant tail nymph.

His father, a high school art teacher from Los Angeles, is a longtime club member. But Seth said he asked his father to bring him to the class because he fell in love with fly fishing after a family vacation in Utah a couple of years ago. He was enthralled, he said,

when he first duped a trout into striking a fly he had created by hand.

Seth is like many children his age. He plays soccer and swims at school. He has a PlayStation 2 at home and a GameBoy in his pocket. But he said no computer game compares with the thrill of catching a thrashing fish, its weight drawing in line and bending the pole.

"I have a friend who might like to try fishing," he said, looking up from his nearly completed fly. "I think I can teach him."

But when the fly-tying class resumed the next week, Seth was again the only youngster in the room.