DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

INFORMATION SERVICE

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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Angling history, ancient and contemporary, records fish caught in bathtubs, drain pipes, and human skulls; on anchors, roof-tops, and campers' tent-flaps; by kites, boats, spears, guns, bow-and-arrow--not to mention conventional hook, line, net, and harpoon.

But surely most curious of all methods to capture a fish, according to a story from the Fish and Wildlife Service, United States Department of the Interior, must be--by tickling!

The practice of enticing fish to grace a later platter by first tickling them "on the belly" by hand, then scooping them up for the catch, is nothing new. In fact, it must have been not uncommon by the 16th century, at least, for Shakespeare furnishes two references: he has Pompey, the Tapster, in Measure for Measure, name the offense of "groping for trouts in a peculiar river;" and, in Twelfth Night, makes Maria exclaim, "Here comes the trout that must be caught by tickling."

But beyond Shakespeare, however, are references quite as convincing on the point of the antiquity of the practice. In the Century Dictionary, as an example of definition following the word "tickle," is presented a quotation from the 18th century traveler, Richard Pococke, in his Description of the East (1743,45). Taking advantage of the piscatorial risibilities to facilitate capture must have been these old Greek fishermen of the river Euripus, for example: (speaking of trout or

gudgeon) "We were informed of a very particular manner of catching them with a net, and men go into the water, tickle them on the belly, and so get them ashore."

Again, as an example following the definition of "gill," from Purchas, His Pilgrimage (1613): "The fishes in the Lake of Venus, being called by the Temple-keepers, presented themselves, enduring to be scratched, gilled, and men's hands to be put in their mouths."

Oppian (198 A.D.), in his Halieutica, "unquestionably the greatest work of antiquity on angling," refers to catching trout by tickling with the hand, in the following lines:

> "The fish in careless ease supinely laid,
> The grappling fingers of the swain invade.
> Up from the deep he springs and bids the prey
> Recant his error in aerial day."

The Greek Aelian (about 230 A.D.), in his De Natura Animalum (Englished, 1565), writes: "Men wade into the sea, when the water is low, and stroking the fish nestling in the pools, suddenly lay hands upon and secure them."

And, finally, for the elder examples from literature, there is Beaumont and Fletcher's Rule a Wife and Have a Wife, roystering comedy of 1624. In this early 17th century piece, one of the characters has occasion to remark: "Here comes a trout that I must tickle, and tickle daintily"--in order to expedite capture.

So these examples, while not too far removed from the realm of myth and poetical allusion to afford convincing evidence, nevertheless do indicate an ancient belief, at least, in such a custom.

Other references, however, culled from books and magazines of a latter-day vintage, afford pretty substantial proof that in some foreign countries, at any rate, tickling is, or once was, a common practice, especially by poachers; also, that the method is not unknown to certain localities in this country.

In Sport, Indeed (1901), one Thomas Martindale has put down an excellent description of this method of catching fish in the River Ware, in Durham, of Northeastern England.

"This is how the tickling is done," he writes. "The fish are watched working their way up the shallows and rapids. When they come to the shelter of a ledge or a rock it is their nature to slide under it and rest. The poacher sees the edge of a fin or the moving tail, or maybe he sees neither; instinct, however, tells him a fish ought to be there, so he takes the water very slowly and carefully and stands up near the spot. Then he kneels on one knee and passes his hand, turned with fingers up, deftly under the rock until it comes in contact with the fish's tail. Then he begins tickling with his forefinger, gradually running his hand along the fish's belly further and further toward the head until it is under the gills. Then comes a quick grasp, a struggle, and the prize is wrenched out of his natural element, stunned with a blow on the head, and landed in the pocket of the poacher."

This account is really too straightforward to leave any doubts that tickling is actually done.

Again, in his Beside the Bonnie Briar Bush (1895), Ian Maclaren, eminent Scotch novelist, has his doctor, Weelum Maclure, say, in reference to his youthful experiences:

"Guddlin' ("guddling," or sometimes "ginniling," is what the practice is called in Scotland) wes a graund ploy. A' think A'm at aince mair wi' ma sleeves up tae ma oxters, lyin on ma face, wi' naething but the eyes ower the edge o' the stane, an' slippin' ma hands intae the caller water, an' the rush o' the troot, an' grippin' the soople slidderin' body o't an' thrown' 'i ower yir head, wi' the red spots glistening on its white belly; it was michtn."

Properly un-Scotched, the paragraph says simply that the good doctor did exactly as Martindale describes, only in some highland loch, and had himself a good time doing it.

Scattered mentions in magazine columns indicate the practice of tickling used in Wales, Germany, New York, and Colorado. In almost every instance the trout seems to be the fish most prone to respond to the human caress before being snatched to land.

A Mr. E. D. T. Chambers, of Quebec, Ontario (Canada), however, in 1902, mentions the practice as prevalent "in one of the midland counties of England, where he lived as a boy," and states that "the boys succeeded with minnows in shallow water, but could not get the secret of the old poacher who practiced the method." He says further that he has known it to be practiced in America "only in the way of experiment, and that those who tickled trout in the Old Country are generally men who dare not be seen on the banks of a stream with rod and line."

There are a number of other references to tickling in the files of Forest and Stream; and, too, the practice is described in some old angling books not readily available. However, the foregoing indicates sufficiently that it is not a myth or a fable.

It may be added that one of the employees of the Fish and Wildlife Service has seen it effectually practiced on salmon and trout in fish cars and tubs, when the fish could be even lifted from the water and held there for a short time before it would make a movement. This seems to indicate that in nature it would not be necessary to grasp the fish by the gills if there were a free chance to toss it ashore.

This same employee has also seen it practiced on salmon which had been hooked, the angler having no landing net or gaff, by approaching with the hand from behind

and gently stroking toward the head until the fish could suddenly be grasped in the gills and jerked into the boat.

Most recent and perhaps most remarkable of instances of catching fish--or at least tickling them to induce complete docility--is the story told in Strange Fish and Their Stories (1938), by H. Hyatt Verrill, of Raoul, Cuban proprietor of the Club Miramar, at Key West, Florida, and his tame fishes.

In the club's big pool, says Verrill, are "groupers, parrot-fishes, jacks and angel-fish, grunts and snappers, hinds and rockfish, mullet and queen turbot, porgies and hamlets, porkfish and schoolmasters and trigger-fish with many others.

"Some have been there for several years, others are new arrivals, but Raoul and his wife know all the trained fish by name and the fish know their names as well as do their master and mistress. Stepping to the edge of the pool, Raoul or his wife claps hands and whistles, and instantly fish appear from the green depths of the water and like a flock of chickens they come hurrying towards their master.

"Speaking in his native Spanish, Raoul calls a fish's name and instantly a big striped and mottled grouper, a snapper or a queen turbot, as the case may be, darts forward to the stone steps. Dangling a bit of crawfish or meat close above the water, the Cuban talks to the fish who leaps from the pool to seize the morsel. Again and again this feat is repeated. Then, to prove that his fish really know their names and will respond to them, Raoul points out the various fish to his visitors, indicating José, or Juan, Molly or Dolores, Tom or Maggie where they are swimming about, and calls any one which the visitor selects. Not once do they fail to answer, but as their names are called, each in turn swims forward to secure its share of food from the man's fingers.

"But even that is not nearly so amazing as the feature of the unique exhibition which comes next. Calling softly to a big marbled grouper, Raoul coaxes it towards the steps, until at last, with a quick flop, the fish actually throws itself out of the water onto the stone where it lies quietly as Raoul scratches and strokes its sides and fins. Apparently the fish enjoys this, for it makes no attempt to wriggle back into the pool. Yet this is nothing to what follows. Slipping his hand beneath one of the fish, the Cuban lifts it from the water and while it lies quietly and contentedly upon his palm he feeds it dry cracker or bread which the fish crunches and swallows as it rests on his hand in the open air!"