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Taking the bait

Clean waters lure fishermen to the city's piers, beaches and riverfronts

By STACEY SZEWCZYK

Once you cast a line into New York waters, you're hooked.

"I bring my mother," says Vionette Rodriguez, 40, who has spent summer weekends fishing off the Coney Island Pier for the past eight years. "She loves to go crabbing. I bring my aunt, my sister. Sometimes all the family comes over."

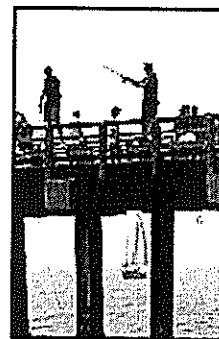
Some days the Rodriguez women catch nothing but porgies and crabs. On others they land bluefish and striped bass. Three years ago, they hooked four sand sharks.

"If I feel like catching something I go over there," says Rodriguez, pointing to the end of the pier, where about 40 veteran anglers are casting into the surf.

One of them is Harry Delgado, 52, who has been fishing off Coney Island since he was 7 years old.

"You take your first walk down the pier and you get lost," says the lifelong Coney Island resident, who has caught fluke, blackfish, striped bass, porgies and, once, a 50-pound skate a mere seven blocks from home. "It becomes an addiction."

Delgado has a lifetime's worth of knowledge of the local waters. He knows the snapper, herring and mackerel he hooks in late July and early August are just a warmup for the big fish runs of September through November.



Bonifacio NEWS

Opening Line: A fisherman tries his luck at a pier in Coney Island.



Egan-Chin for NEWS

Catch and Release: A small flounder gets a second life on Brooklyn's Canarsie Pier.

"They're drawing in the big flukes, weakfish, stripers and blues," says Delgado from the comfort of his lounge chair on the pier. From catch-and-release sport fishermen to anglers gathering the ingredients for a fish fry, more and more New Yorkers are dipping into the city's waterways, whether after work or on weekends.



Anderson NEWS

Some are ready to fish at a moment's notice. Philip Frabosilo, 51, drives a cab festooned with toys, bibles and fishing photos. He keeps four fishing poles in his trunk at all times, prerigged with hooks and sparkplug sinkers. He also trolls for lost souls, running a traveling ministry called Rolling for Jesus out of his cab.

Reel Fun: Howard Beach in Queens

"On the weekdays, my taxicab becomes a City Harvest kind of truck and I collect food from bakeries and donut vendors you see on the street," says Frabosilo, whose fishing tackle is routinely crammed in with 40 to 100 pounds of bagels, donuts and muffins bound for relief centers.

A few months ago, he managed to make his own donation to his program. "I caught a 52-pound striper off Roosevelt Island," he says. "I actually released him, but he died after I took him out of the water. So I gave half to a shelter in Hell's Kitchen on 51st St. and ate the other half. Parts of him are still here in the house."

Restrictions on eating

New York's fishermen are the subject of a documentary, "Gotham Fish Tales," that director Rob Maass recently began screening around the city.

"One of the things that really interested me was how urban people connect with the environment in often the most unlikely settings - you know, some broken-down pier where you can see the BQE," says Maass. "To the fishermen, it represents something very elemental, like hunting and gathering. Most people don't even think of that as a feasible pursuit in the middle of the biggest city in America."

Dave Taft, 43, district ranger at the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, which covers about 10,000 acres in southern Brooklyn and Queen, credits the increased interest with the vast improvement in water quality in the rivers and New York Harbor.

"When I was growing up in Canarsie and in Gravesend, you heard about a fish called a striped bass, but it was like a mythic thing," he says. "We'd take our bikes or the bus to Sheepshead Bay and fish off the piers. We'd catch all kinds of bottom fish - and I never caught a striper. Then all of a sudden they started coming back in the late '70s and early '80s. They are a very beautiful fish, and it's lovely to see."

John Waldman, a senior scientist at the Hudson River Foundation, a

scientific watchdog group that studies the river's water and fish, credits the Clean Water Act of 1972 with allowing the return of many species to the city's surrounding waters.

Whereas the raw sewage that once emptied directly into the rivers resulted in fish kills, the warm, oxygen-rich water released from new waste-treatment plants now nourishes numerous baitfish, which in turn attract large game fish such as striped bass and bluefish. In recent years species like bonito, mackerel and even 3-foot sea turtles have begun to appear.

The downside: These species are potential carriers of contaminants such as PCBs, DDT, cadmium and other chemicals present in New York waterways. Those compounds have been linked to neurological damage, cancer and birth defects.

The New York State Department of Health has issued health advisories for people who eat fish from local waters where chemical contaminants may be a problem. No more than one meal per month, or about half a pound, is recommended for many fish commonly taken from the Hudson, Harlem and East Rivers.

Women of childbearing age, infants and children under the age of 15 are discouraged from eating any fish from local waters. Not everyone agrees with the restrictions, however. "I've eaten fish from New York Harbor," says Stephen Sautner, 38, who heads the press office at the Bronx Zoo-based Wildlife Conservation Society. "My friends have eaten fish from New York Harbor. No one is glowing."

Sautner, who once spotted a harbor seal in the river while fishing near the United Nations building, lives in New Jersey and occasionally fishes before driving to work in the Bronx.

"That entails getting up at about a quarter to 5, driving across the Goethals Bridge and then the Verrazano, hopping on the Belt, and going to Breezy Point and fishing until about 8:00 a.m. Then I change and I drive to work."

Fishing for a living

Local anglers have it easier. Darren Warner, 42, says the best thing about fishing in New York is that it's close to home. Warner, a truck driver, catches snapper, blues, fluke, striped bass, crabs and eels from the parking lot near the Fairway grocery at 133rd St. Last April, he says, a 4- to 5-foot striper that took four men to reel in was hooked from that spot.

If fish of great size and abundance are no longer a rarity in New York Harbor, people who derive their livelihoods from the water increasingly are.

Larry Seaman, 54, is a second-generation eel fisherman who works Jamaica Bay with his 28-year-old son. Seaman, who lives in Rosedale, also runs a wholesale bait operation out of the bay, supplying killies and

horseshoe crabs to local bass fishermen.

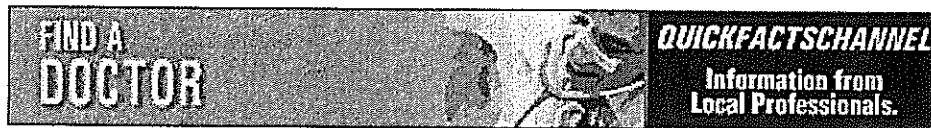
"Not a lot of people do it because it's a lot of work," he says. "You've got to keep repairing your traps. I've gotta keep building new traps. You don't get nothing for nothing in this business. I got up at 3:30 this morning and I didn't get done until almost 4:00 this afternoon."

But the life of a fisherman has its compensations. "I come and go as I more or less please. I get up early, go out early. I'm able to watch the traffic on the Belt Parkway and I'm glad I'm not in it."

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