

Handlining - ROATAN Style

by Ken Serwatowski

For those of you who are unfamiliar with Roatan, it is a sister-island to Ouanaja and Utila, off the coast of Honduras, making up the third of the Bay Islands. Why in the world is there an article about Roatan in the DWF newsletter you might ask? Well, after my wife and I made a third dive trip to these waters, I happened to get a little history lesson in "hand lining Roatan style". With the diving and the island so beautiful, I never fully paid attention to how the Islanders get their dinner. Short of seeing elderly men in very small Dory's, which is a local hand carved boat barely wider than two telephone poles and about eight inches deep at the seat paddling on the open water I never really gave it much thought. A friendly wave would be given to us by the fisherman as we motored to a dive Site and that was the end of it.

While relaxing on the beach sipping a Salva Vida, which means life saver and is one of the only two beers made in Honduras, I happened to catch- some local island children **hand lining** from the shore: Yes; hand lining from, the shore: It all started with three young boys, which looked between six and ten years old, gathering baitfish. They stood perfectly still in the water holding old- wooden boat oars waiting for the baitfish to gather near their bodies. When an adequate school gathered, they slammed the oars into the water stunning the baitfish, and another child would then drag a net through the water quickly grabbing the disoriented baitfish. Once the fish were gathered they broke out their hand lines and quickly went to work.

The rig consisted of some 50 lb or better mono, three way rigged with a stone tied at the bottom for weight. They would hook the baitfish through the mouth on approximately a 36-inch lead and go to work. The rig was then swung overhead like a cowboy's lasso and thrown out into the ocean with quite remarkable accuracy. The line then was pulled in swiftly, and wrapped around the opposite hand in a loose loop as to not tighten to quickly if a fish was caught. The boys worked as a team and then headed home with the catch of the day, which I'm sure, was that night's dinner.

The following day we went into a small town built on the ocean called Oak Ridge. Oak Ridge was the first place a white man ever stepped on the Island; his name being Christopher Columbus. The Island at that time was inhabited solely by the Payan Indians- The Paeans lived in caves on the cliffs overlooking the ocean and are still there today. Inside the caves you can still find artifacts carved from stone that the islanders call Yabba ding dangs, however these items are illegal to purchase or collect. While in Oak Ridge we met a native who called himself Emeril. For twenty U. S. dollars, Emeril would take you on a Dory ride through the mangrove tunnels carved out by the Payans.

These trade routes look the same as they did hundreds and hundreds of years ago. They were used as safe routes without going onto the open ocean-especially in inclement weather. After purchasing a half gallon of gas brought to the dock in a rum bottle and thirty-pulls on the cast iron engine we were on our way.

On the way back from the tour we went out on the open water in our small boat; a storm was brewing, we were low on gas, and the look on my wife's face wasn't pleasant to say the least. I asked her if she thought that this was safe and. in a big NO, she turned back around and grabbed the sides of the boat. On the way in Emeril grabbed a big wooden spool out from under the seat. with at least. 50 lb mono on it. He tied on a homemade lure made from lead and bird feathers. He took out a knife, scraped the lead to make it shine and threw it overboard. After letting out 100 feet or so of line, he looped it to a shock leader which was a black rubber bungee tied to the side of the boat. He began pulling the bait back and forth to give it action. Due to the poverty of the islanders it was apparent that he couldn't afford to use gas without trying to catch dinner at the same time. While doing this, he

said that the technique of hand lining went back to the Payans for as long as history knew. At a failed attempt to be funny I asked "so the Payans invented monofilament line". He shook his head and staid no, looked at me like I was a dummy and under his breath, I'm sure he called me a Gringo. I asked if he caught large fish with this technique and like any true fisherman, he fully extended his arms and said, yep this big, My wife looked at the size of the boat, the space between us and said "there's no room for a fish like that in here".

Unfortunately, or fortunately, if you were my wife, no fish were caught, and we headed in, with the storm moving fast behind us. We were picked up by our cab driver at the dock and headed back to the resort. The cab driver is one of the friends that we have made on the island that also happens to be a fisherman. I told him what happened and he said that he also hand lines the same way and that none of the islanders even own fishing rods. He also said that him and a friend were building their own fiberglass boat, he was bragging about the 50 h.p. motor that he bought used from the United States. This is actually a lot to brag about on the island, he is considered very well off being a cab driver. A lot of the islanders only eat if they have a good day fishing from shore or free diving for lobster. Knowing that he was a Detroit Tiger fan I brought him two hats. Sports memorabilia is non existent in Honduras and is highly prized. For the price of two hats I was invited back for a fishing trip hand lining Roatan style. I told him that I'd bring my rods and reels and bring some for him too, he looked at me and said "Nah, I like it my way" and we headed back to the resort.