

Fish Story

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For five years I lived in the town of Marathon in the middle of the Florida Keys. Since the Keys are not really known as a hotbed of culture there isn't much to do there other than fish. Luckily for me one of my friends was a professional guide who taught me all of the ins and outs of catching one of the largest and most exciting game fish in the world- the tarpon.

One of the things I miss about living down there is the tarpon fishing. However, I make the trek down to Marathon for vacation almost every year so I get a taste to hold me over for a while during each visit. I look forward to these trips all year, so it's no surprise that on the last one I took my gear and headed for the closest bridge the very first night I was in town. For the next two weeks, I grabbed every chance I had to try and land at least one tarpon, but night after night I came up short. The last night I was in Marathon, when I should have been packing up to leave, I decided to give it one final try.

It was about 9:00 PM and very dark when I got to Vaca Cut, which is the channel that separates two of the islands and is a great place to fish. The street lamps up by the road gave off enough light for me to find my way down the rocky path to the waters edge where I had a good, clear spot to cast from.

There was no one else around which was just fine with me. The tide was still coming in and there was a good running current which made for perfect conditions. I set up my gear and hoped for the best.

I made my first cast and immediately got a bite. The next few casts brought a few more hits and misses, and I was beginning to believe this could be my lucky night. Sooner or later something had to latch on to the lure I was throwing. It amazes me that a fish can hit one of those things and get away since the lures have two very sharp treble hooks of impressive size on either end with only about three inches between them. It's not that easy to avoid the razor sharp hooks when you're handling the lures so I don't know how the fish can be so lucky.

On my next cast something shot out from the shadows under the bridge and slammed into my lure. I finally had a fish on the line. I couldn't tell what it was in the dark, but he was putting up a pretty good fight so I thought I might finally have hooked a tarpon. When I got the fish up to the shoreline I could see my catch was actually a barracuda about three feet in length. I was disappointed, but still a little glad that I had at least caught something.

As I stood looking down at the fish I had just pulled up on to the shore it occurred to me that, although I was prepared to catch fish, I was not prepared to catch a fish that was not only very unhappy about it's predicament but also had a mouth full of very nasty teeth. In my hasty departure from the house I had forgotten to bring any kind of tool to remove the big, sharp hooks from a fish's dangerous mouth.

I caught lots of barracuda during my many fishing trips in the Keys so handling him wasn't a problem. The fish didn't appear to be too badly hooked so I bent down, slipped my right hand into his gill, and lifted him up to where I could get a better look at the lure hanging from his toothy mouth. He seemed to be fairly tired at that point so, not wanting to injure the fish unnecessarily, I thought I might as well try to remove the lure with my fingers so I could drop him back into the water.

As I reached for the lure the cuda exploded. He thrashed his head and three foot body violently from side to side trying to get himself free, shaking me like a rag doll in the process. Since I had begun to reach for the lure when he went berserk the loose end of the lure came whipping around until one of the hooks went completely through the end of my left middle finger. Completely. Through.

Now I don't know how many people have found themselves standing beneath a bridge in the moonlight with a three foot barracuda hanging from their hand, but I can honestly tell you I would not recommend trying this at home. He was pretty unhappy about being out of the water, and I was not really interested in putting him back in until we were no longer attached.

Of course, I still had no way of removing the hook from his mouth, which means I also had no way of removing it from my finger either. If the hook had only gone through a small layer of skin the problem would have solved itself the next time the fish thrashed. Unfortunately the hook was through a thick enough part of my finger that I was able to hold him completely off the ground, suspended from my hand like some act in a circus side show.

To make matters worse there was no one around, even within yelling distance, to ask for help. I thought I was going to have to find a rock and kill the fish, and then drive to the hospital with it hanging from my hand out of the window of the car. At least there would not have been much traffic to deal with that late at night, but it still would have been a spectacle. It was about five or six miles to the hospital so there was a pretty good chance I'd pass someone.

As I was trying to decide how to kill the fish as humanely as possible he began to thrash again, spinning his body completely around in a circle. He was big enough that the power of his flailing around made me thrash around right along with him. I'm sure it either looked like I was dancing with

the fish or having a seizure. When he gave one particularly powerful spin he managed to rip the hook, and a substantial amount of my skin, free from my hand. I began to bleed a bit, but at least I was no longer attached to a living garbage disposal with a very bad attitude.

The barracuda fell to the ground and flipped around while I tried to regain my composure and prevent the blood from escaping my body through the resulting exit he had created. His movements propelled him across the ground until he made his way back into the water and incredibly, took off. Since he was still attached to the lure I had to dive for my rod to save it from disappearing into the sea with the fish. Now, of course, I was back to square one. I still had the fish on the line with no way to get the hook out of his mouth.

I figure about that time God grew tired of laughing and decided he should intervene on my behalf. As I was holding the rod under my arm and trying to slow the bleeding from my finger the fish gave a last mighty thrash under the bridge and threw the lure free from his mouth. After I finished the obligatory male "It doesn't hurt at all" dance I went up to the car to look for something to wrap around my bleeding finger. The only thing I could find was a plastic shopping bag, but that was enough to cover the wound.

Since it was still early enough in the evening I decided there was only one thing to do. I made my way back down to the water and went back to fishing. The bag wrapped around my finger made it a little hard to cast, but I got by. I fished for another hour and, although I never landed one, I did end up fighting a couple of nice sized tarpon. Just having them on the line for a few minutes made everything worthwhile.

I'm sure there's a moral buried somewhere in this story, but for now it escapes me. That's probably why, next year, if you want a good laugh all you'll have to do is go down to the Vaca Cut Bridge in the heart of the Florida Keys and look for me. I should be easy enough to spot; just look for the guy under the bridge doing the Cuda Dance in the moonlight.