Out in the Stream: A Cuban Letter

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THE sun on the water is the toughest part of fishing the north coast of Cuba for marlin in July and August. Havana is cooler than most northern cities in those months because the northeast trades get up about ten o'clock in the forenoon and blow until four or five o'clock the next morning, and the northeast trade is a cool and pleasant wind, but out on the water even with a breeze, the sun gives you something to remember him by. You can avoid it by going to the eastward with the current in the morning, fishing with the boat headed into the sun, and then coming back against the current in the afternoon with the sun at your back again as you troll, but sometimes all the fish will be in the short stretch between Havana and Cojimar and there is nothing to do but work back and forth in and out of the sun and take it. I do not believe it is very bad for the eyes if you wear glasses with Crookes lenses. My eyes were much better after a hundred days in the gulf than they were when we started. But it gives you a schnozzle like some rare and unattractive tropical vegetable and in the evening the sun slants up off the water like molten lead and comes up under the long visor of one of those down east swordfishing caps and broils as it works toward that sun's ideal of a nose, the monumental proboscis of J. P. Morgan the elder.

You have a lot of time to think out in the gulf and you can touch the schnozzle with a little coconut oil with the left hand while the right holds the big reel and watch the bait bounce and the two teasers dip and dive and zig in and out in the wake and still have time to speculate on higher and lower things. Yes,

you say, but why do they have to work into the sun? Why can't they work in and out, north and south instead of east and west?

It would be fine if you could but when the breeze gets up out of the northeast and blows against the current it makes a big sea and you cannot work in the trough of it but have to go either with it or against it.

Of course you may not ask that question at all. You may be bored blind with the whole thing and be waiting for the action to begin or the conversation to start. Gentlemen, I'd like to oblige you but this is one of those instructive ones. This is one of those contemplative pieces of the sort that Izaak Walton used to write (I'll bet you never read him either. You know what a classic is, don't you? A book that everyone mentions and no one reads) except that the charm, and quaintness and the literary value of Walton are omitted. Are they omitted intentionally? Ah, reader, thank you. Thank you and that's mighty white of you.

Well, here we have Piscator, as Walton puts it, sitting on a chair which, with the heat, has given him that unattractive condition called fisherman's seat, holding now in his hand a cold bottle of Hatuey beer, and trying to peer past his monumental schnozzle and out over the sea which is doing considerable rising and falling. The boat has been headed into the sun and if a fish comes now Piscator can see him. He can see the slicing wake of a fin, if he cuts toward the bait, or the rising and lowering sickle of a tail if he is travelling, or if he comes from behind he can see the bulk of him under water, great blue pectorals widespread like the wings of some huge, underwater bird, and the stripes around him like purple bands around a brown barrel, and then the sudden upthrust waggle of a bill. He can see the marlin's mouth open as the bill comes out of the water and see him slice off to the side and go down with the bait, sometimes to swim deep down with the boat so that the line seems slack and Piscator cannot come up against him solidly to hook him. Then when he is hooked he makes a sweeping turn, the drag screwed down, the line zings out and he breaks water, the drag

loosed now, to go off jumping, throwing water like a speedboat, in those long, loping, rhythmic, pounding leaps of twenty feet and more in length.

To see that happen, to feel that fish in his rod, to feel that power and that great rush, to be a connected part of it and then to dominate it and master it and bring that fish to gaff, alone and with no one else touching rod, reel or leader, is something worth waiting many days for, sun and all, and as said, while you wait there is plenty of time to think. A good part of the things you think about are not put into a magazine printed on shiny paper and designed to go through the mails. Some they can put you in jail for if you write and others are simply no one's business but a great part of the time you think about fish.

Why does the south wind stop all fish biting off the north coast of Cuba while it makes them bite off the Florida keys?

Why will a mako shark not eat a hooked or dead marlin or swordfish when all other sharks will?

Is there a connection between the mako and the swordfish just as the wahoo, or peto, seems to be a connecting link between the kingfish and the sailfish and marlin?

What makes intelligence and courage in a fish like the mako who will refuse to pull, when hooked, unless you pull on him; who will deliberately charge a fisherman in a boat (I have a moving picture of this); who seems to be thinking while you are fighting him and will try different tactics to escape and come to the top of the water and rest during the fight; and who will swim around and round a hooked marlin and never hit him? The mako is a strange fish. His skin is not like a shark, his eye is not like a shark, his fins are more like a broadbill swordfish than a shark and his smell is sweet and not sharky. Only his mouth, full of those curved-in teeth that give him his Cuban name of *dentuso,* is a shark's mouth. And he has shark's gills.

What use is the sailfish's sail to that fish? Why should this fish which seems to be an unsuccessful model, an earlier and more fantastic model for the marlin, thin where the marlin is rounded, weak where the marlin is strong, provided with insufficient pectoral fins and too small a tail for its size, have survived? There must be a good reason for the sail. What is it?

Why do marlin always travel from east to west against the current and where do they go after they reach Cape San Antonio at the western end of Cuba? Is there a counter current hundreds of fathoms below the surface current and do they return working against that? Or do they make a circle through the Caribbean?

Why in the years of great abundance of marlin off the California coast are the fish equally plentiful off Cuba? Is it possible that marlin, the same fish, follow the warm currents of all the oceans, or that they have certain circuits that they make? They are caught in New Zealand, Tahiti, Honolulu, the Indian ocean, off Japan, off the west coast of South America, off the west coast of Mexico and as far north on the west coast of the United States as California. This year there were many small marlin taken off Miami, and the big ones appear off Bimini just across the gulf stream several months before they run in Cuba. Last summer they caught striped marlin as far north as Montauk Point off Long Island.

Are not the white marlin, the striped marlin and the black marlin all sexual and age variations of the same fish?

For me, with what data I have been able to get so far, they are all one fish. This may be wrong and I would be glad to have any one disprove the theory as what we want is knowledge, not the pride of proving something to be true. So far I believe that the white marlin, the common marlin caught off Miami and Palm Beach, whose top limit in weight is from 125 to 150 lbs., are the young fish of both sexes. These fish when caught have either a very faint stripe which shows in the water but disappears when the fish is taken from the sea or no stripe at all. The smallest I have even seen weighed twenty-three pounds. At a certain weight, around seventy pounds and over, the male fish begin to have very pronounced and fairly wide stripes which show brightly in the water but fade when the fish dies and disappear an hour or so after death. These fish are invariably

well rounded, obviously maturing marlin, are always males, and are splendid leapers and fighters in the style of the striped marlin. I believe they are the adolescent males of the marlin.

The striped marlin is characterized by his small head, heavily rounded body, rapier-like spear, and by the broad lavender stripes that, starting immediately behind the gills, encircle his body at irregular intervals all the way back to his tail. These stripes do not fade much after the fish is dead and will come up brightly hours after the fish has been caught if water is thrown over him.

All varieties of marlin breed off the Cuban coast and as the roe brings from forty cents to a dollar and a quarter a pound in the Havana market all fish are carefully opened for roe. Market fishermen say that all the striped marlin are males. On the other hand they claim all the black marlin are females.

But what is the intermediate stage in the development of the female of the white marlin from the handsome, gleaming, well proportioned though rather large headed fish that it is as we know it at a hundred pounds, before it becomes the huge, ugly headed, thick billed, bulky, dark purple, coarse fleshed, comparatively ugly fish that has been called the black marlin?

I believe that its mature life is passed as what we call the silver marlin. This is a handsome, silvery marlin, unstriped, reaching a thousand pounds or more in weight and a terrific leaper and fighter. The market fishermen claim these fish are always females.

That leaves one type of marlin unaccounted for; the so-called blue marlin. I do not know whether these are a color variation stemming from the white, whether they are both male and female, or whether they are a separate species. This summer may show.

We have caught and examined some ninety-one marlin in the last two years and will need to catch and examine several hundred more before any conclusions can be drawn with even a pretense of accuracy. And all the fish should be examined by a scientist who should note the details of each fish.

The trouble is that to study them you have to catch them and catching them is a fairly full time job although it allows plenty of time for thinking.

It really should be subsidized too, because, by the time you buy gas in Havana at thirty cents a gallon to run twelve hours a day for a hundred days a year, get up at daylight every morning, sleep on your belly half the time because of what the fish do to your back—pay a man to gaff—another to be at the wheel, buy bait, reels at two hundred and fifty dollars apiece, six hundred yards of thirty-six thread line at a time, good rods, hooks and leaders, and try to do this out of the money you fenangle out of publishers and editors, you are too exhausted physically and financially to sit up nights counting the number of rays in the fins and putting a calipers on the ventral spikes with four hundred water front Cubans wanting to know why the fish isn't being cut up and distributed. Instead you are sitting in the stern of the boat, feeling pretty good and having a drink while the fish is being butchered out. You can't do everything.

All the people I know with enough wealth to subsidize anything are either busy studying how to get more wealth, or horses, or what is wrong with themselves with psychoanalysts, or horses, or how not to lose what wealth they have, or horses, or the moving picture business, or horses or all of these things together, and, possibly, horses. Also I freely admit that I would fish for marlin with great enjoyment even if it were of no scientific value at all and you cannot expect anyone to subsidize anything that anybody has a swell time out of. As a matter of fact I suppose we are lucky to be able to fish for them without being put in jail. This time next year they may have gotten out a law against it.

Curiosity, I suppose, is what makes you fish as much as anything and here is a very curious thing. This time last year we caught a striped marlin with a roe in it. It wasn't much of a roe it is true. It was the sort of a roe you would expect to find in certain moving picture actresses if they had roe, or in many actors. Examining it carefully it looked about like the sort of

roe an interior decorator would have if he decided to declare himself and roe out. But it was a roe and the first one any of the commercial fishermen had ever seen in a striped marlin.

Until we saw this roe, and I wish I could describe it to you without getting too medical, all striped marlin were supposed to be males. All right then. Was this striped marlin how shall we put it or, as I had believed for a long time, do all marlin, white, striped, silver, etc. end their lives as black marlin, becoming females in the process? The jewfish becomes a female in the last of its life no matter how it starts and I believe the marlin does the same thing. The real black marlin are all old fish. You can see it in the quality of the flesh, the coarseness of the bill, and, above all in fighting them, in the way they live. Certainly they grow to nearly a ton in weight. But to me they are all old fish, all represent the last stages of the marlin, and they are all females.

Now you prove me wrong.