

Hooked On Recovery

July 23, 2004

Sand Eels

DMHAS Commissioner Tom Kirk, a true friend of recovery, asked me to speak to his staff the other day about some of the things CCAR is doing. I welcomed the opportunity. And considering I didn't have a lot of time to prepare, I asked for some divine inspiration. I was moved to start with a story about sea glass, highlight some CCAR activities and then wrap it up with a story about sand eels. Sound a little strange? I thought so too, but I've learned to trust that small voice. So I decided to go with it. In today's piece, I'll share the sand eel story. It's a metaphor for the work we do here at CCAR. It may also apply to what you do.

I returned from vacation a couple weeks ago where my family and I spent a lot of time on the beach. We do all kinds of normal vacation things; reading, eating, beachcombing (mostly looking for sea glass), bocce, paddleball, fishing and kayaking. I launch my kayak off the beach and usually fish out there. Now a lot of guys will fish with lures (artificial baits), and sometimes I do, but I wonder about lures. I have come to the conclusion that lures are not designed to catch fish, they are designed to catch fishermen. I have a basement full of lures, a lot of them never used. But boy are they beautiful!

I started fishing with my mom at an early age. She's a country girl from Missouri and she taught me to fish with a hook and a worm. If we got real fancy we might use a bobber or float with it. My mom says the first time I went fishing was in a Missouri farm pond when we went back for a visit. Caught a few catfish. I don't really remember it, but I've seen a picture. I do remember catching a catfish at Bolton Notch, seeing my line go taut as the fish picked up the worm and swam away. To this day, I still get juiced when I think about it. The point of all this being, the hook and worm is a simple, yet effective fishing method.

Sand eels are the "worms" of Cape Cod ocean fishing. They are actually fish, long thin fish that bury themselves in the sand, thus the name sand eels. They form schools that number in the kazillions and gamefish LOVE them. At low tide, you can use a heavy metal rake specially designed for harpooning sand eels and get your own fresh bait. Raking sand eels is hard work, good exercise. If you hit a big school it can take a few minutes to get enough for a day. If you can't find them, you will spend a lot of time dragging that heavy rake through the sand. I rake, because one thing I've learned; the fresher the bait the better. Tackle shop bait could be a few days old; it has more of an odor, more mushy and is not as appealing as one just plucked from the water. Would you eat a three day old cheeseburger?

This is where we start to build the metaphor. One very hot day, as I was out on the kayak fishing I had a thought, "Sand eels are the bait of hope". The sand eels I had with me were the result of some hard physical labor. The hope embedded in me is the result of hard labor as well. (Note: when I have some time to relax and think, these are the things I think of. Scary, I know. My sponsor says that when I'm alone, I'm in bad company). Anyway, indulge the thought a little while and let's carry it through. So if these fresh-raked sand eels are the bait of hope, then the fish I'm trying to catch are symbolic of those persons still sick and suffering from the disease of addiction.

Occasionally, from the kayak, I can look into the water and see hundreds and hundreds of stripers swimming aimlessly a few feet below me, just as we can see those not yet in recovery. I can flip the sand eel in front of them and they just swim by. On other days, the bait barely hits the water and there's a fish on. What we do as people that believe in recovery, as "fishers of men" if you will, is to cast the bait of hope to those still in the sea of addiction and the ocean of denial. We want to get them hooked, hooked on recovery.

As I write this I can hear the groans. Maybe this idea was a product of too many hours in the hot sun. But there's more! Sometimes the fishing is slow and that can be discouraging. Sometimes the fishing is fantastic and that can be invigorating, yet exhausting. Such is the work in trying to assist people into recovery. Every once in awhile I will hook a really big fish and that fish will pull my little kayak into waters I have never been before. It's a little rough and too far from shore. Every now and then, people hooked on recovery bring me places I've never been before. It's a little rough and too far from shore. But it is adventurous and exciting, and for that I am grateful.

Hooked on Recovery is a biweekly message from CCAR Executive Director Phillip Valentine, person in recovery since 12/28/87, devoted husband, father of four (expecting number five) and just another surf fisherman. He welcomes all your comments and suggestions on this column, email him phillip@ccar.us. Or visit the website at www.ccar.us to see previous articles.