



Wetting a Hook in Texas

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

All over our state, as spring approaches, you might catch a young man heading to his favorite fishing hole. And young women, and older Texans as well. Anglers everywhere are pulling out their fishing gear, anticipating that rising temperatures will draw larger fish into shallower water.

Minnesota's ten thousand lakes may get more publicity, but no state beats Texas in providing year-round opportunities for freshwater and saltwater fishing. Texas ranks first in the continental United States with nearly 5,000 square miles of waters within our borders. More than 1.8 million Texans drop a line in the water at least once in a year, putting fishing near the top of recreational pastimes.

Fishing provides one of life's simple pleasures. It's quiet, relaxing, and a great opportunity for the young to learn from the older generation. Wetting a line offers a chance at fresh air, some carefree hours away from the job, and the opportunity for quiet conversation and memorable times with family and friends.

The satisfaction of fishing is within reach of everyone. From the youngster with the cane pole to the professional angler competing for hundreds of thousands of dollars in prize money, Texans love to fish.

They're also pretty good at it. The 2008 Bassmaster Classic, the so-called "Super Bowl" of bass fishing, was won last month by Alton Jones of Waco, who took home the \$500,000 top prize.

"My grandfather taught me how to fish, and I wish he could be here to see this," Jones said later. His start was typical. Most of us remember well the relative or friend who introduced us to fishing.

And since Texans love good yarns, we have an unlimited appetite for fish stories—especially if they're true. One involved a largemouth bass named "Ethel," whose fame began at the end of a line held by Mark Stevenson in 1986 on Lake Fork in Northeast Texas.

This 17.67-pound trophy bass grabbed the state record at that time, and launched a conservation program that remains unique in the United States. It's known now as the Budweiser ShareLunker Program, administered by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD).

Qualifying for ShareLunker requires catching an extraordinary fish—13 pounds or larger. The 443 trophy bass accepted thus far have come from waters throughout Texas, including 54 public reservoirs. The first one this year was caught by 15-year old Tyler Goetzman of Willis, who hooked a 13.06-pound, 24-inch bass on Lake Conroe in January.

ShareLunker uses DNA testing done in Athens, Texas—the largest such program in the nation—to promote catch-and-release of large fish and to selectively breed trophy largemouth bass.

Of course, bass are hardly the only target of Texas anglers. Catfish always rank high in popularity. The record for a blue catfish is a whopper from Lake Texoma that stretched nearly six feet and weighed 121.5 pounds. There's also strong pursuit of a variety of other fish, including perch, crappie, sunfish, trout and other species.

Fishing is serious business. Freshwater fishing generates an estimated \$3 billion annually for the Texas economy. Those dollars spent on food, lodging, transportation and equipment multiply in communities throughout the state.

As you'd expect, Texas men and women are prominent in many fishing halls of fame. A recent inductee into the Bass Fishing Hall of Fame is the late Nick Crème of Tyler, who created and popularized the first plastic fishing worm.

Fishing is so popular among many Texans that if they are not holding a fishing line, they are probably thinking about it. Good times are in store for Texans who wet a hook and await the big bite. This year, why not share that experience with a youngster or a friend?

Sen. Cornyn serves on the Armed Services, Judiciary and Budget Committees. In addition, he is Vice Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Ethics. He serves as the top Republican on the Judiciary Committee's Immigration, Border Security and Refugees subcommittee and the Armed Services Committee's Airland subcommittee. Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge. For Sen. Cornyn's previous Texas Times columns: www.cornyn.senate.gov/column.