


There have been many nights spent far up unnamed river tributaries, the only sounds those of tiny frogs, the rustle of wind in the thatch roof and a distant deep voice of mystery from the jungle. But not this time. Not in this place.



**The
Metropolitan
Tarpon of
San Juan**
by Riley Love

San Juan, Puerto Rico, waits until well past the witching hour before its nightlife takes an unfathomable breath and open its eyes. The lights are bright, the traffic pounds. Sidewalks clatter with footsteps as diners, drinkers and dancers find their paths through open doorways, until the night sky overhead rotates away to the other side of the earth. The music scene is muy rico y suave. Salsa is taken to the next level by altosaxophone lines speaking the language of ska. It's smoother than the dark 8-year-old rum. The place is a ball.

It leaves much to reflect upon, then, in the hallowed stillness, the quiet holy moment of the fisherman's morning, waiting at the water's edge for the first light of dawn. Shortly, the sun will reflect enough orange light from the

bottom of the clouds in the east to go out on to the water. Mist rises from the lagoon's surface, gray edges of mangroves just perceived without enough light to stimulate the color receptors of our retinas. A sublime instant.

Then, instead of the call of gulls heading out to sea for the first flight of morning, a Boeing 757, the Jet Blue redeye from Nueva York, roars down the trigonometry of its approach to San Juan International just next door. This is countered by an Airbus 320, blasting skyward on the first flight of the morning to Miami. Tiger Woods could ping the thing with a 3-iron.

"Forty-five minutes," says Capt. Omar Orraca of Caribbean Outfitters, sitting beside me. "That's my record."

He nods at the next jet throttling down toward the runway. "A lady from the States who fishes here regularly had her first tarpon on within 45 minutes of walking off the plane." That tells the tale of this rather unique place.

Indeed there are many examples of urban fisheries, such as strip-er fishing before the backdrop of the Manhattan skyline, the record sturgeon in San Francisco's Golden Gate Bay or even the streams and ponds of Tulsa. All are jewels of respite from the neighboring hectic environment. Yet these brackish mangrove lagoons are large and the fishing pressure is low ... and they're full of tarpon all of the time.

This includes the San Jose and Torrecilla lagunas. In fact this fishery claims some other records,

including the most tarpon caught in a single day (56), and the second most (47) by a group of one captain and two anglers.

Tarpon drive me crazy. They make me nuts. I go totally crackers. They roll and gulp air all around the boat, even when they are not feeding. What or who else does that?

Tarpon have an air bladder connected to their esophagus that is full of blood vessel-rich alveolar tissue similar to a lung. This exchanges oxygen across the membranes of arterioles onto hemoglobin for transport in the blood. Juvenile tarpon are obligatory air-breathers, dependent upon air for their oxygen, even while swimming

in oxygen-rich water. As adults, they continue this more likely as a learned behavior. In one study, adults were placed in an aquarium with a lid so they couldn't gulp air and still thrived, so they were no longer air-dependent.

This behavior does make them more adaptable to oxygen-depleted brackish water, but I still think they mainly do this to exasperate me.

"Tarpon speak to us," Capt. Orraca explains, "if we take time to listen." He believes that when tarpon are not feeding, they surface about every 22 minutes, or three times per hour. When they are feeding, this increases to every 8 to 12 minutes.

"How fast they move down from

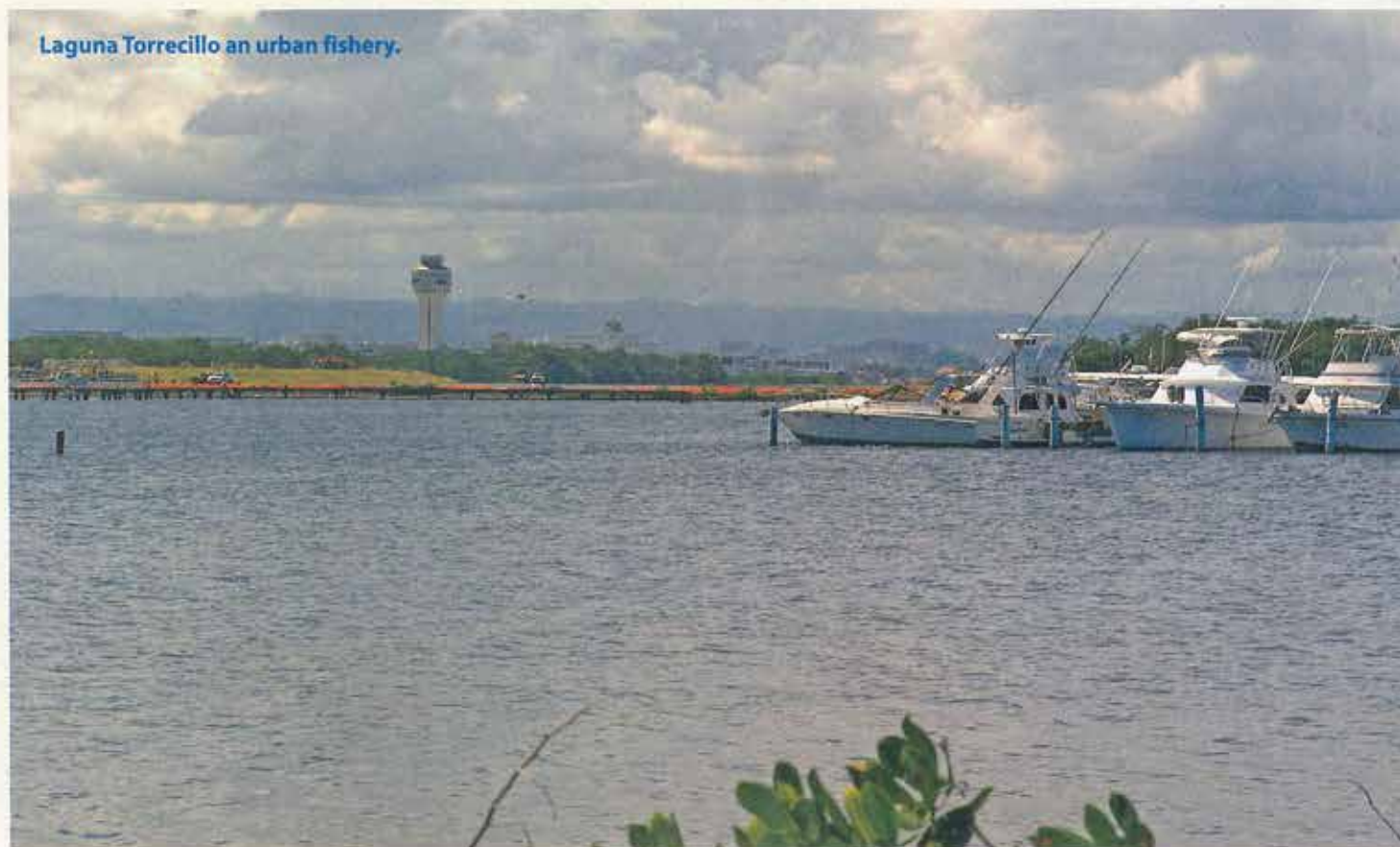
the surface indicates how aggressively they are feeding," Capt. Orraca says. "The angle of descent tells me if they are feeding on the bottom or more shallow. Of course, you can gauge their size as well."

"That's what I like about this place," he says as he gazes out over the expanse of San Jose Lagoon. "I can follow up to six different pods of tarpon at once and get a good idea of what is going on."

With time one comes to appreciate how social these animals are.

THE PERFECT HOME

The San Jose and Torrecilla lagunas and the surrounding area have



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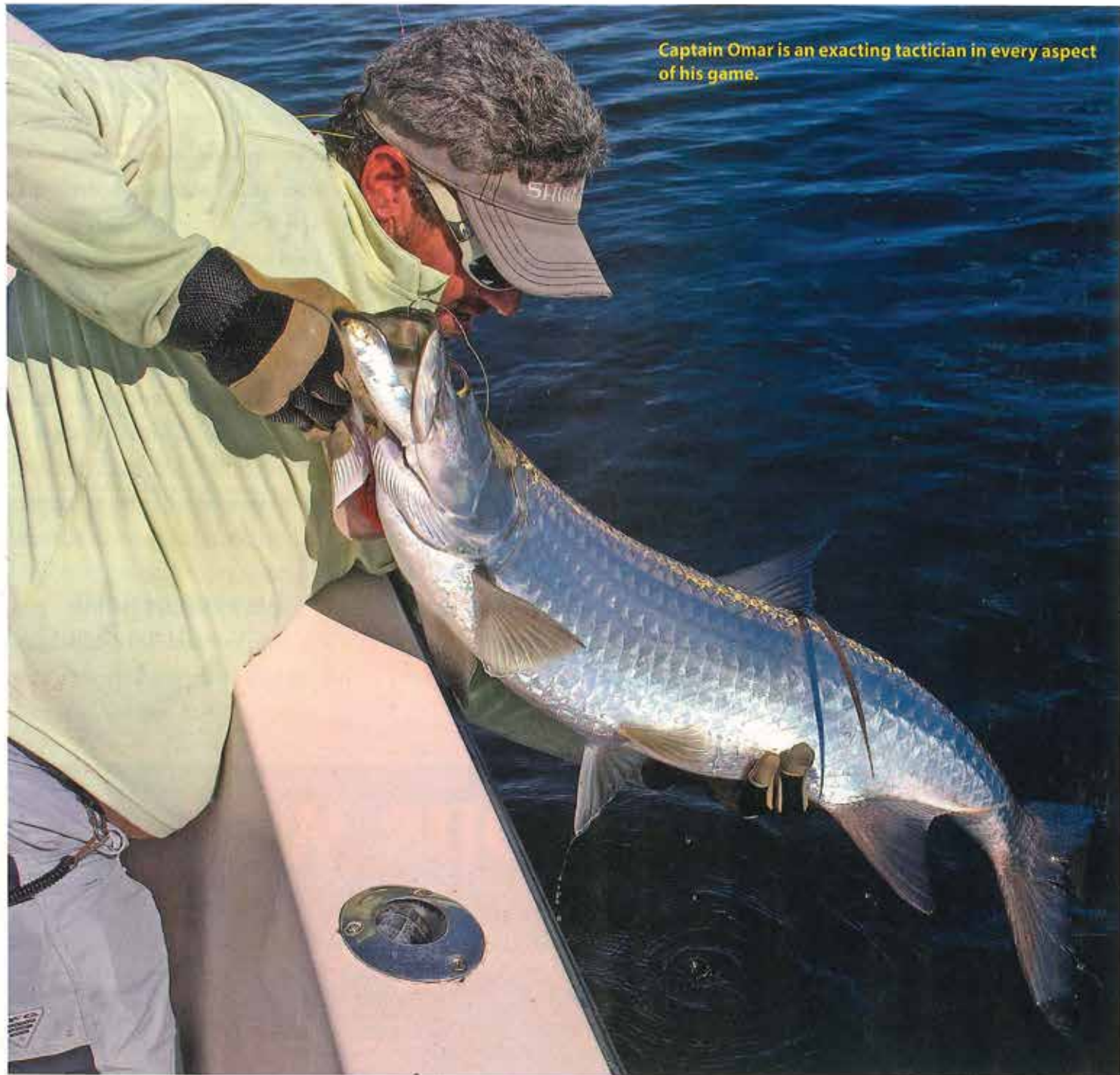


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Captain Omar is an exacting tactician in every aspect of his game.



several advantages stacking the deck in their favor.

Although tarpon spawn with greater secrecy than the Puritans, it is felt that they migrate offshore to depths possibly greater than 500 meters to do so. In Florida, this translates to a quest of 60 to 120 miles to find depth and possibly the necessary iodine concentration. In Puerto Rico, these conditions can be reached just 1-1/2 miles

out, where the edge drops away toward the Puerto Rico Trench, the deepest aspect of the Atlantic. This would result in a briefer larval stage of development in which the immature individuals rely on ocean currents to carry them inshore where they undergo metamorphosis. This would seem also explanatory of an earlier sexual maturity of the indigenous tarpon. In Florida, tarpon become gravid

at the 60- to 70-pound range, but here they are ready to court and spark at about 50 pounds.

Further assistance comes from an unanticipated source, world government. Don't reach for the defibrillator paddles just yet, your heart can continue to beat ... the effort was not aimed at benefitting sport fisherman. There are two other species here that rank far above us: manatees and mangroves.

Manatees are protected by all world governments in waters where they dwell. As part of the U.S., Puerto Rican manatees are shielded by the Endangered Species Act. This also prevents the destruction of their habitat.

Mangroves have even more going for them. In 1982, the United Nations ordered the charters of the International Society for Mangrove Ecosystems be incorporated into all laws regarding mangroves. Subsequently statues were passed enabling the Environmental Protection Agency to safeguard wetlands in coastal states as well as Puerto Rico and other U.S. territories. Since 2005 the EPA has solidified a position that entrains the authority of the

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Department of the Interior, the U.S. Department of Commerce, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the National Marine Fisheries Service. This is about one loud sneeze away from calling in NATO forces. In other words ... those mangroves aren't going anywhere. And, you'd better watch those offhanded remarks to manatees about their weight.

Because of the protections afforded to the mangroves and the manatees, anything else that calls the area home thrives — including tarpon.

ENTICING THE BITE

Depending upon seasons and conditions, the local captains will

fish these tarpon in a number of ways, just like in other places. Lures can be effective; part of the year they will take a dead bait lingering near the bottom, sometimes a crab. Most of the fishing is done with livies. These are netted in the mornings back in the canals, stocking the live wells with anchovies and thread fin herring (greenies).

Mojarra, also known as sand perch, are the larger bait and were netted or purchased from locals along the way who caught them in the near dark before dawn. Mojarra are seen in the lagoons, shooting across the tops on underwater banks that are white with the discarded shells of the small local mussels.

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Many fly fishermen come here as well with excellent success. This is not a perfect fly fishing destination because there is so much bait in the water. The captains will typically chum up a bite with livies for the fly fishermen to cast within.

TARPON TACKLE

Capt. Orraca and I share an affinity for all things Shimano. He readies three sizes of rods outfitted with Stella 4000s with 8-pound test Suffix, Stella 8000s with 12-pound and the larger Shimano Saragosa 1400s with 25-pound test.

Like all students of the game, he knows the hook-up percentages come from attention to the terminal tackle. With the two lighter rigs he has a secondary 8-foot leader of Cajun Red mono (he

loves the stretch as well as the color) tied to a double loop of line with a Yucatan knot. Then six feet of 30-pound Yo-Zuri fluorocarbon joins via a blood knot. With the larger rods, he uses 60-pound Ande pink for his secondary leader, then 60-pound Yo-Zuri for his primary leader.

"We all switched to circle hooks in about 2000 and it really helped our hook-up ratios," he says. His rigs sport 3/0, 4/0 and 6/0 circle hooks respectively. Capt. Orraca feels many a good fish has been lost by using a mismatched leader, too heavy for its mated hook. He gave me a good demonstration on matching hooks and knots.

He swiftly tied three circle hooks on the same weight line with a clinch knot, a loop and a snell.

Standing behind his boat's center console he deftly tossed each hook and line across the front of his windshield and drug them back across 10 times. With two of the rigs, the hooks would flip down onto his lap without catching. But with the third, he was 10 out of 10 with the hook embedding its point into the edge of the windshield and holding fast like the thing owed it money. He simply smiled and raised his eyebrow. I remembered this with each tarpon I landed with this rigging demonstrating the circle hook caught vertically in the center of its upper jaw. Which knot? Now you have your own experiment to try.

We need to learn more about tarpon's response to vibration. "Some days the fish won't take the gree-

nies, will only eat the anchovies," Capt. Orraca said. "Greenies make a 'clack-clack-clack' sound you can hear from the boat and it really puts them off."

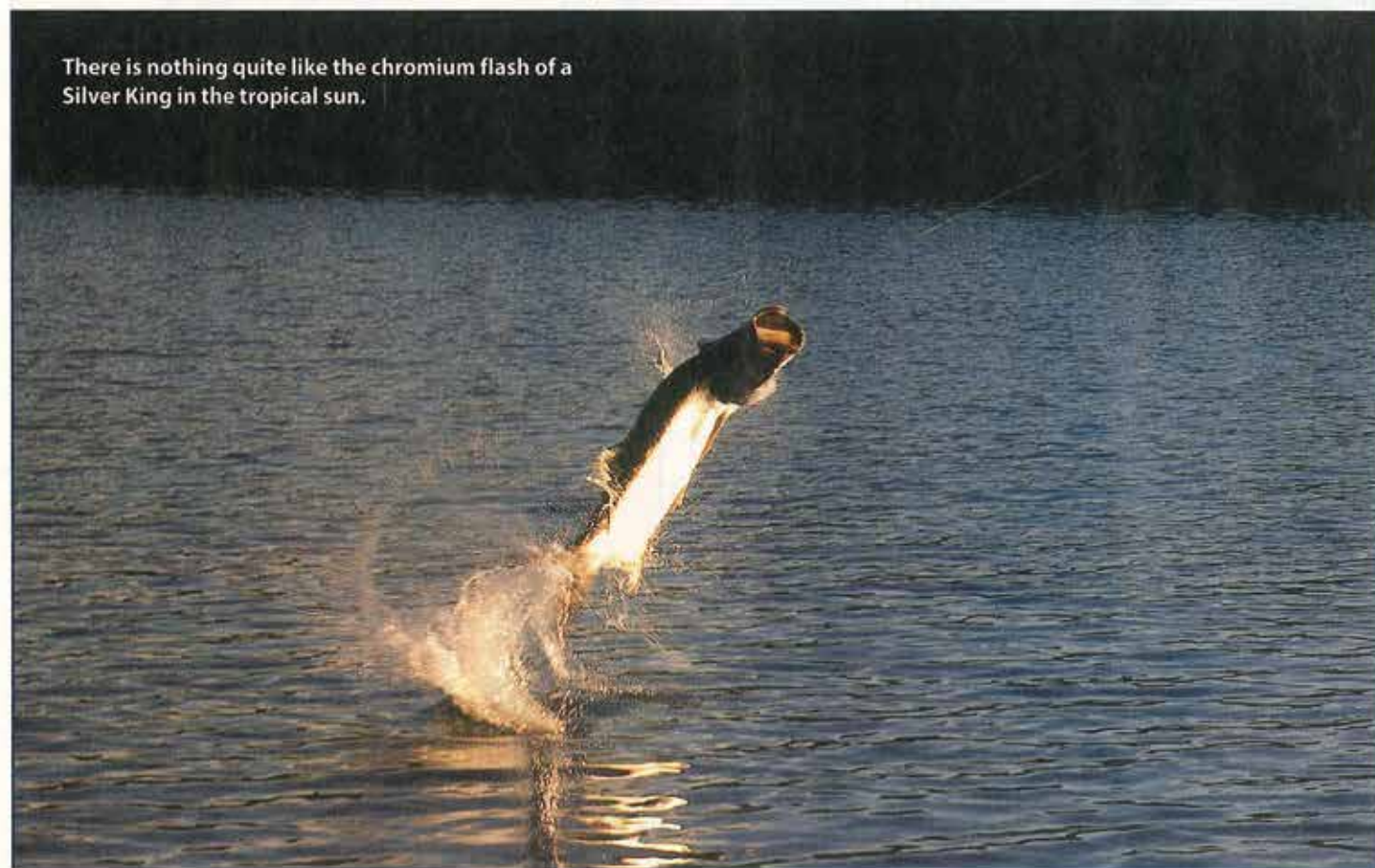
This is why his favorite lure is the D.O.A. TerrorEyz. "We key on the big eye on this bait as to why it is effective for getting strikes. But the other factor is the vibration this large eye causes moving through the water." Likewise in the realm of fly fishing with the Clouser minnow. The case is made that the fly's large eye is an attractant but it also generates vibration.

The new Yo-Zuri minnows are evolving in this direction. Their novel lures not only change color when submerged but are engineered with longitudinal grooves to produce a subtle wave form in

water that sets it apart from previous models. Which component, color variation or vibration will impact the bite more?

Certainly, mechanical waves, or sound when within our auditory range, travels much better in water than air and fish have specific sense organs for this in their lateral lines. This gives them vibratory perception superior to our own. Electromagnetic waves, we call light or color when within our visual range, move poorly in water. It is largely filtered out in the first couple of meters, with upper wavelengths, predominantly red, becoming invisible first. Color is almost completely gone by 10 meters down. So color isn't present in the aquatic environment as it is in ours.

The ability of fish to sense color is controversial. Species have differing numbers of light-sensing organs, rods and particularly cones (the color sensors) in their retinas, with offshore species, such as billfish having less and shallow-water species having more. But fish generally can discern color if present; there is some consensus that they may see green or chartreuse the best. There is evidence that they perceive polarized light, specifically unlike humans who take in the whole jumble of random unorganized rays indiscriminately. Capt. Orraca thinks tarpon become more sensitive to the blue end of the spectrum as they age. Certainly, fish process contrast more importantly than color



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LEFT: Come mornings, I like my coffee and my tarpon fishing hot.



RIGHT: Since the Cretaceous, tarpon have swam these warm seas for 100 million years, waiting for fishermen to come.

and we need to gain focus on this to interpret how they perceive the world and how to push

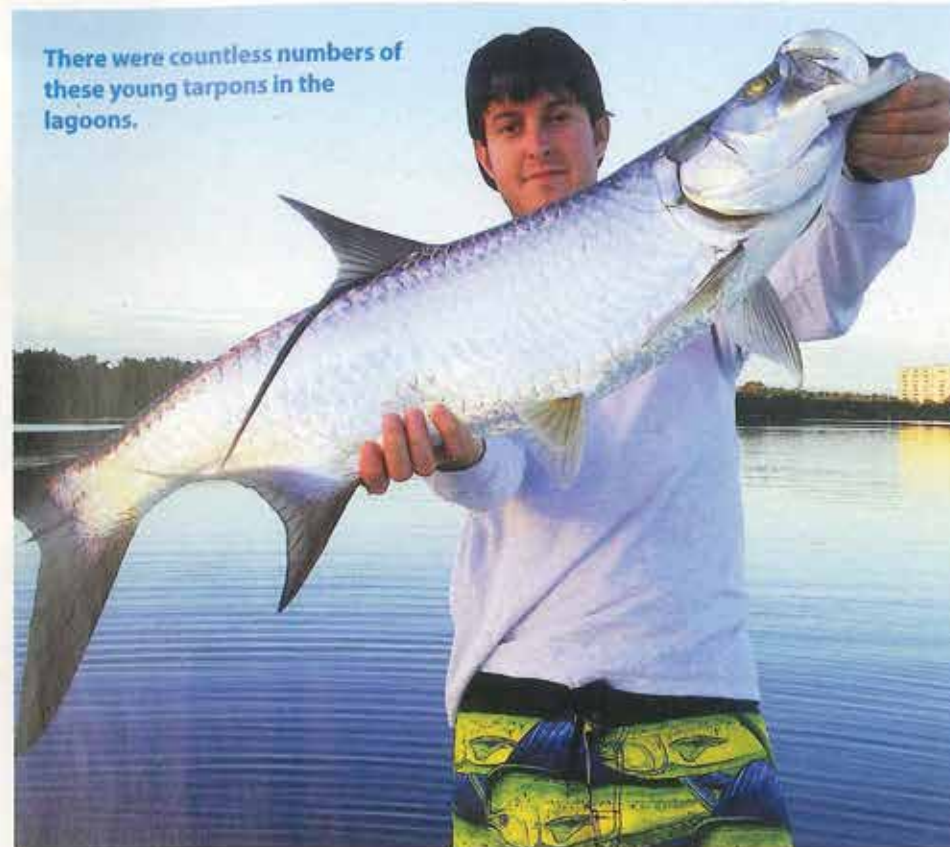
their buttons. Vibration may rule ... but at any length (or wavelength), a bag full of those new

Yo-Zuris just slid into my tackle box like aces up the sleeve.

Here's a last tip from this local expert. When faced with the situation of a big fish on a lighter rig, Capt. Orraca quickly applies a light coating of WD-40 spray to the fishing line. This allows him to apply much more of the reel's drag to the fish than if the line were dry.

A LAST TALE

It was said that nothing can kill a tarpon except a shark or a temperature change of greater than 22 degrees in less than 72 hours. These factors aren't pres-



There were countless numbers of these young tarpons in the lagoons.

ent in this fishery. Drifting with the breeze across San Jose lagoon, Capt. Omar told me a story with heart. I hope I get it all right.

"Many years ago, when I had just started here, I worked for another captain on his boat. One day I caught a big tarpon, 91 pounds on 8-pound-test line. The captain wanted to bring the fish in to establish a local line-class record. I opposed killing the fish but he was the boss and so we brought it onto the deck and headed in. I tell you ... it was the worst thing I have ever done as a fisherman. The tarpon looked up at me, directly in the eye. Then he looked inside of me. His eyes so clearly asked the question, 'Why are you killing me?' It was too much to bear so finally I took off my shirt to cover his face so that neither he nor I would have to

continue witnessing this terrible end. It took him 22 minutes to die there, lying on that deck. In the end it was all for nothing, the instrument that measured line test was broken so the record was never made. I swore that day I would never kill another of these tarpon ... and I never have."

Having fished for tarpon in Florida, Mexico, Belize, Honduras, Costa Rica and Venezuela, it must be said this is far and away the most convenient and likely the most reliable fishery yet encountered. If you go, you'll wish to head to Old San Juan for dinner and mounting a pub crawl. Try Lupelo's tavern for a glass of suds. It's an earthy place but the selection and connoisseurship is out of this solar system. Check with Milton behind the bar ... ask him if he still has my shirt. 🐟

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



RILEY LOVE is a physician and writer living in Kentucky. Some of his first steps brought him to the water's edge and he has been traveling the world to fish ever since. Beginning with the lakes and streams of the Midwest, he is part of a three-generation tradition of discovering back-country destinations for sport fishing on multiple continents.

After 50 years of fishing travel, his only goals are to go somewhere new and try something different again this year. He also has a home in Key Largo, Fla., where he regularly fishes and also scuba dives. He has published more than two dozen articles on a variety of subjects but his chief interest is the fact and fiction of fishing. He is a member of the International Game Fish Association and The Billfish Foundation.