

# Panama 2.0

New Horizons on the Isthmus... Where the Road Ends

Story and Photos by Riley Love, MD



Pangas are the perfect craft for casting to yellowfin tuna. Michael Love Jr. on the fly rod as his father, Mike Sr., looks on.





The Journey Bay, a floating fishing lodge. Complimented by a brace of 31' Bertams.



Hunter Love, fishing the same waters of Pacific Panama as his father and grandfather. But what of the next generation?



A coast of breathtaking beauty



A retired naval landing craft serves as crew quarters.



It is difficult to remember the real meaning of the term "breathtaking" until something actually takes your breath away. In that interval of quiet between exhalation and inhalation you realize... there is nowhere in the world that you would rather be.

The ancient god that created the Pacific coast of the Americas, from Alaska to Chile was likely the spirit of all great artists that would follow. Yet along the seaboard of Panama, the primeval one had an especially good day. The robust spectacle of waves breaking on tectonic architecture is superseded by a dreamland of islands, indescribably beautiful dots even when only a fraction of an acre, are covered with caps of rainforest and delight with waterfalls cascading down steep cliffs into the sea. The only comparison to describe this place are the floating islands in the movie *Avatar*. You will dream of them for the rest of your days. Breathtakingly gorgeous, there is nowhere you would rather be.

Thirty years ago, at the legendary Club Pacifico on the island of Coiba, now passed away with the tides, these eyes first regarded the marvel of Pacific Panama. But like all eyes of fishermen, they do not focus on the lush forest, rocky escarpment, or rookeries of Frigate birds - they extrapolate beneath the waves where such structure creates an equal wonderland for fishing.

Under the tropical sun at midday, when perspiration drips from the brow and the iced beers in the cooler are endowed with a potent magnetism, it is wondrous to remember what

makes this region a fishing Mecca begins near the South Pole, just off the coast of Antarctica. The initiating force is no less than the mighty rotation of the planet itself.

This "Coriolis Effect," [named for French mathematician and engineer Gaspard-Gustave de Coriolis] of Earth's eastward movement begins the transfer of water and wind across the globe. Near the pole, one of the greatest ecological conveyor belts on the planet begins, the Humboldt Current.

Named for Prussian explorer and geologist Alexander von Humboldt, this Large Marine Ecosystem is also known as the Peru Current. Supporting an extraordinary abundance of marine life, more than any other current on Earth, it determines the climate of the South American coast which reflects its flow back out into the far Pacific as the Equatorial Current. Then Poseidon's gift to the Central Americas begins.

Just above the equator, the North Equatorial Countercurrent begins a subsurface flow back eastward. This water is colder, has higher oxygen content and supports more of the lowest forms of life in the food chain than the warm, still, oxygen-depleted surface waters of the Pacific. The migration of the great pelagic species follows this highway. As it strikes against underwater structures near the coast, as well as the push of shallow water away by weather, upwelling of this vibrant flow occurs toward the surface. It is that dynamic which makes this coast the great trophy fish destination of our hemisphere. The legendary subsurface mountains that become magnets for the big nomadic predators, like Hanni-

bal Bank and Zane Grey Reef are the lodestones for the anglers who pursue them... like us.

With the passage of the decades, many fishing outposts, both land based and floating have come and gone along the seaboard of the Americas. Captain Lee Campbell, former co-owner and manager of the Panama Big Game Club and now permanent Panama resident, had organized a two-chapter trip aimed at exploring some fishing off the grid of previous ventures. The first part would take us to Cebaco Bay. Here the "lodge" is a 110-foot mother ship at anchor, the Journey Bay, in its previous life an oilrig supply in Louisiana.

The ship exists because of the fishing passion of the family of James Wiess, owner of the largest marine construction company in Panama. The origin, or essential dynamic of this part of our fishing story begins with James' father. It touches the heart of such as me... because it began in a bar. The setting was Australia, the time: World War II. A lonely Air Force Airman sitting in a bar turns and sees a girl who took his breath away. He was leaving to go in harm's way the next morning, but vowed to her he would return no matter how long the war lasted. Two years later he kept his promise, and a family - life's dominant current

which moves events across generations, began. He would be stationed in Panama temporarily after the war and history did what history does; it moved stone upon top of stone. His grandson Kyle, age 29 was our host and a fishing captain aboard the Journey Bay.

The Wiess cut their teeth early. Kyle caught his first Panama marlin at age 8. Between age 12 and 13, he was the number one catch-and-release champion for the International Game Fish Association. He has caught more than 110 marlin personally. At their present set up, they have caught as many as 15 marlin in a day.

They have a second boat, a retired naval landing craft as a support vessel and crew quarters. If they need to pull off a beach landing, well... they're ready. Also maintained is a squadron of refurbished 31-foot Bertram sport fishermen as the daily go-go-um fleet. Onboard, every detail is done correctly - from the first-class rods and reels, down to the last knot on every leader. Their location is within striking distance of the island of Coiba, Hannibal bank and the Tuna Coast.

The second chapter of this fishing trip would take a full day of travel. After a goodly run from the Journey Bay up

Panama seemed about as close to paradise for the traveling angler as any place in our hemisphere

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the Rio San Pedro, we disembarked at Puerto Muts, which resembles a movie set from a film on chasing old Nazis hiding in some remote South American dive. But it was a great place for a cold beer and homemade lunch. We were going off the radar of the usual sport fishing crowd and this set the tone. Down the coast to a piece of seashore, which has been more popular with surfers than anglers, this is Cambatal Beach. As described, the factors at play are the ocean current and the undersea structure. Lee Campbell had his eye on this region because the "edge" of abrupt underwater runs in very close to shore. There were many pinnacles targeted by native fishermen here who only had pangas at their disposal. So panga fishing it would be. This was both metaphorically and de facto, "where the road ends." The beach and hotel were both beautiful.

As Captain Campbell put it, "I have never met a more honest, hardworking and sober community of people." Fishing here continues to be relatively underdeveloped and presents a new horizon for the future.

Three decades... to me Panama seemed about as close to paradise for the traveling angler as any place in our hemisphere. But like all tales of Eden, it becomes a story of paradise lost.

Young fishermen become old fishermen and every one of those has watched the change in their lifetime. There is no better example than South Florida and the Keys. Compared to the United States, this is still very unspoiled and wild habitat. Still,

Fresh albacore, an exceptional dinner guest.



there is a perceptible change in the fishing. In fact, a drop off like I have never witnessed before.

This piece began with a simplistic description of some of the natural forces that began three million years ago when the Isthmus of Panama filled in solidly, separating the oceans and establishing the current dynamics as they are now - a set up for constant renewal. Additionally, the gentle reader was introduced to the ideas that there are top-flight operations available and still new fishing habitats to explore. So the question... "What up?"

Several attempts were made to reach out to the Aquatic Resources Authority of Panama (ARAP), headed by Ms. Zuleika Pinzon in preparation for this article. I had hoped to get real data about measurement of fish stocks, but no response was obtained.

There are other boots on the ground. The Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute is based in Panama because of the intense biodiversity in the region. Dr. Hector Guzman, who was kind enough to respond to an email, is a staff marine biologist who published an analysis reconstructing Panama's total fisheries catches from 1950 to 2010. Overall, underreporting of catches were estimated at about 40%. About 15-20 % of catches were by artisanal fishermen and the rest by large commercial boats. Recreational fishermen, mainly targeting sailfish and marlin, were estimated to release about 70% of their



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# Meanwhile, back at the ranch...

I would not wish the United States model on the gentle people of Panama... or anyone else. The ceaseless litany of overlapping local, regional and national government regulating agencies is matched only by the unending myriad of local, regional and national fishermen organizations seeking members to join. They are like Will Rogers' multiple strategies for winning an argument with women, "...and none of them work." At the end of the day we need far more advocacy.

Again, information gathering is part of the problem, but not the only fraction. In the U.S., The Marine Recreational Information Program replaced the failed Marine Recreational Fishery Statistics Survey at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). In reviewing their 169-page report just out in January, 2017 they applaud themselves vigorously for making progress in methodology, but so far there seems no active use of information. This has become a consistency.

We are swimming in the water with fiburonos. The PEW Charitable Trust and Environmental Defense Fund are well-heeled entities with solid track records of stabbing recreational sports fishermen in the back. PEW has completed research recently, which forms the basis for a recommendation to shut down 30% of the world's oceans to all fishing. This may be a sound idea but brings to the fore a persistently recurring non sequitur: why should recreational fishermen, practicing catch-and-release techniques, be combined in policy making with industrial commercial fishermen? When one contemplates what the recreational fisherman spends additionally in taxes on sales and licenses to support management programs for a single day on the water to release back into the environment the majority of his catch, compared to a commercial trawler, it is indeed mystifying.

Data from the Brookings Institute shows that our pastime creates over 500,000 jobs and pumps approximately \$90 billion annually into the U.S. economy. Other sources estimate combined outdoor recreation industry creates 6 million jobs and \$646 billion in economic activity. With the days of his last term waning in December, President Obama signed into law the Outdoor Recreation Jobs and Economic Impact Act of 2016. Sponsored by Representative Donald Beyer [D-VA-8,] it charges the Department of Commerce to enter into a memorandum with the Department of the Interior and Department of Agriculture to study and analyze the outdoor recreational economy and its attribution to the overall national economy. This arrives with the expected hoopla and fanfare. But in the end does this look like anything more than additional government organizational overlap? When is the advocacy supposed to materialize? It is tormenting to wax negative in the face of some effort that might be positive. But, they didn't do anything meaningful for sport fishermen with their last two data collection programs; this track record smells old lead.

The modern day fisherman should be the steward of our fisheries with conviction, yet we are not. Neither are the Panamanians. What could be more worthwhile? I still dream of those islands.

catch. The numbers were minuscule compared to other fishing. He cited the lack of trained officials measuring catches. As Dr. Guzman related, there is no national database for sport fishing and no one is regulating it.

In reviewing the 189-page 2016 report "The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture" by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) for the reconstruction of world marine fisheries, the difference in reported catch and actual tonnage was estimated at 53%. Looking at their upper boundary of uncertainty for this data, you would essentially double that number. The point here is that good decision-making begins with good information, and it is lacking.

It may seem surprising that historically the United States has exported about \$6 million of fish per year to Panama. Central Americans eat only about half the amount of fish as the worldwide average, 23 kilos annually per capita. The governments there are actually encouraging more fish intake as part of an overall program to improve the health of the local diet. Fish in the market is relatively expensive for the rural workingman. But with improved purchasing power from their economy, the 4 million Panamanians consume more than their neighbors. Going back to the 1950s, Panamanian commercial exports were mainly herring and anchovy for fishmeal and oil. In recent decades this has diversified to include tuna, dolphin fish, and shrimp. Ninety-five percent of the commercial fishing is on the Pacific side of the country.

When I ask Panamanian captains about what diminishes their fisheries the most, their first response is always longlining. Fishing vessels over 10 tons are considered commercial and smaller ones are artisanal. Panama banned long line boats over 6 tons in December 2010. The next year they limited long lines to 600 hooks and banned powered retrieval systems. Yet all is not rosy.

Coiba is the largest island in Central America. It is bounded by the Bahía Damas reef, the second largest in the Eastern Pacific. When Club Pacifico was here in the 80s, the island was a penal colony. Dictator Manuel Noriega was in power and Coiba was where you ended up when you were on "Old Pineapple Face's" shit list. Now it is a 430,000-acre national park, marine reserve and a UNESCO World Heritage site. In a more recent survey, 14 long lines of varying size were counted around Coiba, some fishing illegally inside the park. The next point is this: there may be good laws on the books but without enforcement they are meaningless.

CeDePesca, the Centre for Development and Sustainable Fisheries is a nonprofit with stakes in Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador, Panama, Peru, Brazil, Chile, Argentina and now the Caribbean. They are trying to team with ARAP and local fishermen for further analy-

Exotic roosterfish are synonymous with fishing these latitudes.



Sunset at Cambul Beach... breathtaking.



sis of longlining and regulation of their fishery. They are currently training local skippers on data collection.

Captain Campbell also feels juvenile fish are getting hammered in the bays and estuaries by the practice of net fishing with very small mesh. He has observed many four- and six-inch roosterfish, wondrous beauty but poor table fare, dead in the bottom of net boats. There is an absence of enforcement here.

There is an emphasis on the commercial opportunity of aquaculture. This is a great hope for the future to spare wild fish stocks. The FAO report shows the potential for a 40% jump by 2025. For Panama this would largely be fresh water tanks of tilapia, which are largely resistant to disease and human mismanagement and the more profitable fresh water shrimp. Experts of fish from Panama peaked in 2014. Fisheries account for about 5% of the Gross Domestic Product.

Panama has recently joined 36 other countries and the European Union in ratifying the Port State Measures Agreement (PSMA) aimed at controlling illegal fishing. There is a current proposal to amend the current fisheries law, dating back to 1950, by ARAP and implement a moratorium on new fishing licenses for activities that are harmful such as long-liners, trawlers and purse seine netters. The proposal would also extend areas of prohibition for some gear for 10 miles around Hannibal Bank just off Coiba,

the archipelago of Las Perlas and the Azuero Peninsula. But of what value will this be without enforcement?

The Billfish Foundation published an article in 2013 entitled "Sportfishing in Panama: A Natural Economic Gold Mine." They related that in 2011, 86,250 visitors fished in Panama. Overall, they spent \$97 million on charter boats, fuel, food, lodging and other related expenses. For every U.S. angler that visited the country, eight more were interested in Panama as a fishing destination. This is a potential of \$776 million for the Panamanian economy.

The \$97 million mentioned above also generated \$170.4 business-to-business sales within Panama, 9,503 Panamanian jobs, \$3.1 million in new tax revenues

and an increase in Panama's Gross Domestic Product by \$48.4 million dollars. Going back to Dr. Guzman's data, the mortality of fish from sport fishing was not even great enough to show up on his graphic representations. We should not be painted as the enemy here.

For many anglers, a trip to the fantastically beautiful coast of Panama has afforded them the trip of a lifetime - and it still can. My father took me there when I was young and I have taken my son. I hope that when my grandchildren stand on a boat's deck and regard the wonders of this place they will not simply dwell on how it had been and how it might have been if good works had been done. That would take their friggin' breath away. ☺

