

# Fishing's Power of Zen

This ancient activity remains a great way for leaders to recharge.

BY SIMON CONSTABLE

**M**ost of Will Gardenswartz's days are so consumed with games it stresses him out. As the CEO of the gamification consulting firm Life Carrot, Gardenswartz is always hustling to television executives and other entertainment producers to incorporate online games to increase audience size and engage viewers. It's exhausting work. ➔

Artwork by: Peter Horvath

➔ But there's one activity that's anything but a game to Gardenswartz: fishing. He's been doing it since he was a child. He even chose to live near Sun Valley, Idaho, to be close to some of the world's best fishing spots. "In business, I'm easily distracted by things that don't matter," he says.

But when he's out on the water, he can devote his entire mind to the narrow matter of catching fish.

"God never did make a more calm, quiet, innocent recreation than angling," wrote author Izaak Walton in 1653's "The Compleat Angler," and fishing has been popular ever since. In 2012, the World Bank estimated that there were around 220 million recreational fishers worldwide, contributing about \$190 billion a year to the global economy. More recently, The Outdoor Foundation estimated that more than 45 million Americans fished in 2015—more than the number of people who biked, hiked or camped.

According to the foundation, many of those who fish say they do it for the exercise, spending time with family or friends, or observing scenic beauty. But nearly half of them say it's to get away from the usual demands of life. Fishing

often involves getting up early and staying in a quiet place far away from mobile phone service (while the fish may put up a fight, they aren't doing it over email). Fishing is a form of meditation for a large group of people; more Americans fish than practice yoga. After all, fishing fits the same description as meditation: Both are simple, repeated tasks often done for hours on end. Fishing has a positive impact on mental health, perceived well-being, prevention of chronic disease, and reductions in healthcare burden, according to a study from Curtin University in Perth, Australia.

It's even been used to help treat war veterans who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Indiana University asked 67 veterans who took a fishing trip together to Utah to write about their experiences. The academics hypothesized that the act of writing down

## BEYOND THE BAIT AND TACKLE

FOR SOME, A ZEN FISHING EXPERIENCE MAY REQUIRE MORE THAN JUST A STURDY POLE AND A FEW WORMS. ENTER THE GADGETS:

### Garmin eTrex 30x Worldwide Handheld GPS Navigator (\$300)

A sturdy, waterproof GPS system finds remote fishing holes—and the way back home.

### 2016 Hobie Cat Mirage Outback (\$2,500)

A souped-up kayak, complete with comfy chair.

### Wellmi Mosquit Ultrasonic Mosquito Repellent (\$43)

Uses sound waves to keep bugs from spoiling the serenity.

### Fell Marine MOB+ Wireless Cut-Off Switch (around \$250 for all parts)

If you fall in, a kill switch stops the boat's engine. But not the embarrassment.

### Weems & Plath SOS Distress Light (\$100)

For stranded anglers, the 60-hour light has beams visible up to 10 nautical miles.



their experiences would help the vets cope with their PTSD. What they found was that an overwhelming number of vets credited the fishing for making them feel better. “One of the things we clearly hear vets say is that the fishing broke up the monotony of traditional programs aimed at treating PTSD,” says Associate Professor Rasul Mowatt, who designed the study.

With such restorative effects, it isn’t that surprising that some of today’s high-powered, always-busy leaders are lured to fishing’s soothing qualities. Former President George H.W. Bush, Martha Stewart and chairman of Cox Enterprises Jim Kennedy are all reputedly keen anglers, to name a few. Sure, leaders have applied the lessons they’ve learned from fishing in their own areas of expertise (“Go where the fish are” is a phrase found in countless business books). But what truly hooks people is fishing’s uncanny ability to transport people away from a rapidly disruptive world to a place where everything is straightforward. More than one-third of Americans who fish do it more than four times a year.

In whatever role T.J. Daly of Richmond, Va., has had—investment banker, venture capitalist and now CEO of the custom design manufacturer Acorn Sign Graphics—he says his mind is constantly racing. Everything changes, however, after four or five hours of catching trout on a river or going after bonefish in the ocean. “When you go fishing, particularly fly fishing, the sole focus is what the fish are doing, so all the business stress goes away,” Daly says.

Of course, sometimes busy leaders need a nudge to get back into that meditative state. As a teenager, Gardenswartz was a fishing guide, and he recalls taking a private equity pioneer on a fishing trip. The man, who was used to fierce competition in business, apparently wasn’t interested in anything but the task at hand. When the famed wheeler-dealer blurted out, “Why am I not catching fish?” Gardenswartz retorted with a line that now, many years later, makes him blush. “Sir, the fish are in the water and you spend two-thirds of your time tying on new flies,” said Gardenswartz. The man paused for a moment and replied: “You know, you are right.” ●

**LEISURE**

# Means of Meditation

**Number of people who:**

Fish:	Bike:	Practice Yoga:	Hike:
45.7 million	43.1 million	36 million	37.2 million

Sources: The Outdoor Foundation, Yoga Journal and the Yoga Alliance, 2016.