Eeling on the Pamlico

Billy Whichard prepares to fill eel barrel with fresh water.
Article by
Marcie Gurley & Susan Hassell

Introduction

Eeling is a hobby, sport, or job that not many people know much about. But we found one man who thoroughly enjoys eeling on the Pamlico River. We were able to ask him personally to give us some information and facts on catching, selling, and possibly eating (!) those snakelike creatures, eels.

We met Mr. Billy Whichard at his business location at Whichard's Beach in Chocowinity, on a scorching, hot July day. He's a stocky, friendly looking man, a man whose tanned, rough-hewed visage suggests that he is at ease outdoors, on the water.

We joined him around a little table in his small, cool, air conditioned camper office, a sanctuary on this scorching day. He introduced himself as Billy Whichard from Chocowinity. We found that he enjoys the water and loves living on the Pamlico River more than anything. Sweaty and hot from his hard work that day, Mr. Whichard began to tell us of one of his favorite activities--eeling.

Life: Why don't you just explain to us how you go about, from start to finish, catching eels.

Mr. Whichard: Well, we start out--the biggest problem you have in eel fishing is getting the right kind of bait. We go out around here this time of year and use a throw net and catch these little menhaden, and we use them for bait. Now, down river farther, they use a lot of regular crabs for bait; they take and just tear the backs off of them.

Life: How big is a menhaden?

Mr. Whichard: Oh, right now they are from that [holds thumb and forefinger about a half inch apart], way up to three to four inches long; but the ones we use run about two to three inches long is the best size. But they have to be about two inches long before they'll stay in the throw net. They school up out here this time of the year.

In fact we just put the boat over today to start trying for them tonight. We normally go out late in the afternoon and catch the bait and then go on and set the pot. We have to ice it down and use it the next day.

The way I eel I take my pots up everyday and set them back late in the afternoon. You set them back late in the afternoon; that gives you fresh bait for that night's catch. They will not pot--not justifiable--during the day-time. We have caught some in the day-time, but the water's getting kind of muddy. You'll catch a few in the day-time, but mostly it's at night. And the fresher your bait, the better your catch. We move our pots near 'bout everyday. If we set them in one particular area [and] if the catch is good, we set back there again. We fish anywhere from 75 to 100 pots when we are in full swing. We are liable to set a few in a
different area everyday to keep check 'cause you catch them just like any other kind of fishing—you'll catch them here one day and over yonder the next day. Sometimes you catch them in deep water; sometimes you catch them in shallow water. It varies.

Eel fishing is the most unorganized fishing I have ever seen; there's no pattern to it. You know, you take fish: Maybe you'll get a run of fish that comes in a certain time of the year. You catch them then, but eels are a sort

Billy castes net for bait fish menhaden.

of seasonal type fish. But there's no pattern to it. You are liable to go down the river and do real good in one particular area for a day or two and be fishing up the river too and not doing nothing. Next couple of days you're liable to do good up the river. There's no set pattern to the way that they run or pot.

Life: Do you put your pots where they
seem to be catching them?

Mr. Whichard: Most of the time we like to set them on the edge of a sand bar. You get where your mud and sand meet. Most of the water around here runs four to six feet deep in them particular areas; and after 30 years fishing one particular river, you know them spots. I been messing with it going on 30 years; sometimes we do good and sometimes we don't. We got a water quality problem. It seems like it gets worse every year.

Life: When did that start being a real problem?

Eel pot: used to catch eels
Mr. Whichard: In the last four or five years. It's getting worse.

Life: That drives the eels out?

Mr. Whichard: Well, we've had a red sore disease, and now they've got a bacteria that's killing them too. That red sore disease will attack them mostly after they've been captured in the pot and they got a red sore on them that gets infected—that's why it's called red sore disease. And then that will finally kill it [eels], and it affects fish too.

Life: Is that right?

Mr. Whichard: Yes, and now they've got a different kind of bacteria that's occurred in the last couple of years that is different from the red sore disease. They have not really found out what's causing it because I've had doctors from Raleigh and biologists from all over the state working. They've been working a couple of years, and they can't pinpoint it.

Life: What does it look like?

Mr. Whichard: Well, it forms a sore too, but it comes from the inside. It gets the bacteria in them and it comes up—sort of like I've seen knots on them, like a rising, you know, where you have a rising on you and it finally busts open and it gets them infected and they die. The red sore affects it mostly when it's in captivity 'cause he'll scrape himself in the pot; then he'll get it [bacteria] on his skin and it
will penetrate him.

Life: Mr. Whichard told us about what kind of schedule he follows in his eel
ing operation.

Mr. Whichard: We go out and we'll set pots out late in the afternoon and we'll
go back in there every morning and pick them up.

Life: You don't leave them in during the day?

Mr. Whichard: No. We have a big boat. We use a 21 foot boat, and we have pumps
in it. We pump water into a barrel, continuously pumping water into a bar-
rel, and we dump the eels right into this barrel to keep them alive until we
get them to the dock. Then we dump them into a wire cage, and we keep them right
in the water to keep them alive all the time.

This time of the year you can run into a problem of keeping them in the
water because the water is so hot. The oxygen content is low and you run into
the problem of getting a big concentra-
tion of them together and they don't
have enough oxygen to live. So we have
onshore tanks where we pump water out of
the ground to keep the temperature down.

We have had better luck with them with
that during the summer time.

Life: Have any biologists had any idea
about what's causing these diseases,
these bacteria?

Mr. Whichard: No. They can't pinpoint

it. They got a net that they work daily
or work right frequently. They go down
there and get menhaden out of it, which
has this red sore disease plus this other
virus. And they are constantly running checks on them. They'll catch
some fresh ones and put in a cage in a
different area and see if they get the
disease up there. They're back and
forth, up and down the river. They're
trying, but something like that to me is
just about impossible to pinpoint where
it's coming from.

Life: The eel pot, how big is it and
what's it made out of and how does it
trap the eel? Is it like a crab pot?

Mr. Whichard: Well, some of them are
shaped just like a crab pot, but the
wire mesh is one half by one inch. Some
of them are one half by one half [inch].
Most of my pots are round pots. They
are about 30 to 36 inches long and about
nine inches in diameter. They have two
funnels in them. One funnel is closed,
and one funnel is open. I got some of
them over there in the boat. I'll show
you if you haven't ever seen any.

Life: Outside in the tough July heat,
we asked Billy about cleaning eels.

Mr. Whichard: We sell 'em live, so we
don't clean 'em. I have seen one
cleaned. You clean them like you clean
a catfish. You drive a nail through his
head, you cut the skin around the head,
then you pull it off with pliers, and
the guts come out with the skin. It's
like a catfish.
Life: I've never eaten one. What do they taste like?

Mr. Whichard: [Laughing] I've never eaten any! I don't care anything about eating any!

Life: This is your business, and you don't even eat them!

Mr. Whichard: That's right!

Life: What's the main market for eels? Who do you sell them to?

Mr. Whichard: We sell them to big buyers from up north.

Life: You said they buy them live?

Mr. Whichard: Yes. They put them in a big tank truck.

Life: Aren't they popular in Europe and Japan?

Mr. Whichard: Yes. Those are the main markets.
Life: And in the northern United States?

Mr. Whichard: Yes. They eat a bunch of them around New York City 'round Christmas. I think it has something to do with some kind of religious service, but I don't know.

Life: After we'd taken some pictures of Billy on his boat, we asked him about his personal background. He was born in 1932 in Pitt County. He moved to Whichard's Beach at an early age and has remained there, off and on, ever since. He did serve in the Coast Guard for a while but returned to Whichard's.

Mr. Whichard: You see, I've got to be close to the water!

Conclusion

The unusual activity of catching eels is not for everyone, but for a man like Billy Whichard, it is a great part of his life. He knows a great deal about catching, selling—-but not eating—-eels.

We learned from Mr. Whichard the pure art of catching eels. Whether it's for money or just for fun, eeling is a job that requires much time and hard work. Early mornings are spent taking up the pots and removing the eels. And after a hard day's work, Mr. Whichard and his daughter, who works with him, spend time setting the pots out again, only to repeat the steps over, day after
day, for several months out of the year. Mr Whichard described the diseases eels carry and what causes them; he knows several ways to prevent the eels from picking these diseases up.

The interesting part is that people really eat these snakelike creatures! For example, we learned that in Japan eel is a delicacy and different recipes are used for fixing them to eat.

As we were preparing to leave, we walked out to see Mr. Whichard’s eel pots and boat docked on the pier, ready for use that afternoon. And as he talked, we learned. For water lovers like Mr. Whichard, eeling is a pleasure and reward. We certainly enjoyed learning about eels and eeling from him.

Susan and Recie thank Mr. Whichard for his story.