

Respect

By Tom Dickson

Back in the 1990s, my longtime friend Rob Buffler and I were regarded as authorities on rough fish—carp, redhorse, drum, bullheads, and the like. Together we had written *Fishing for Buffalo*, a book introducing anglers to the sport, culinary qualities, and natural history of fish widely ignored or disparaged. It was no *A River Runs Through It*, but the book garnered some positive reviews, and we still hear from fans who say they consider it the bible of rough fishing technique and lore.

One result of our fame (or infamy) was that for years during the holidays I received rough fish-related presents from friends and family. If someone saw an apron covered with shortnose gar images, or a T-shirt emblazoned with big, meaty lips and the words, “I’m a Sucker for Fishing,” they thought of me.

The only gift I still have from that era is a children’s book titled *The Christmas Carp*. I still read it every holiday season.

Set in Prague, *The Christmas Carp* tells the story of Thomas, who is spending the holiday with his grandfather. As in much of Eastern Europe, many residents of Prague eat carp for Christmas dinner. In the Czech Republic, carp are raised in aquaculture ponds, just like channel catfish in the southern United States. Fishmongers with huge tubs brimming with live carp appear on the streets a few days before Christmas. Customers select a good-looking specimen and take it home in a waterproof bag. The carp spends its final days in the bathtub, swimming in clean water that makes it taste better. Then it is killed, cleaned, breaded, fried, and served with potato salad.

In the book, Thomas and his grandfather buy a carp. After they bring it home, the boy becomes attached to the fish, which he names “Peppo.” He convinces his grandfather not to kill Peppo so it can be his pet. Finally, the grandfather convinces Thomas to release Peppo into the Moldau River as a gesture of kindness and goodwill.

I admire the way the story depicts carp

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not only as a traditional holiday dish, but also as a species deserving respect and—for one boy—even love.

How different from the United States, where carp are considered “trash fish” and thrown onto the bank to rot.

That widespread attitude here seems especially odd considering that the common carp was brought to this country in the 1880s as a food fish. The species was so prized that at first they were distributed only to prominent citizens for stocking in private ponds. The U.S. Fish Commission later released carp into public rivers and lakes. Able to tolerate the nation’s increasingly polluted water, which killed native species, carp thrived.

Yet because fish take on the flavor of the water they swim in, carp quickly fell out of favor. Even European immigrants began considering them a “dirty” fish. Adding to their declining prestige, carp, like suckers and catfish, are “bottom feeders,” consuming aquatic insects, seeds, and other foods from lake and river bottoms. Also like suckers, they have a lipped mouth, which many people find repulsively humanlike.

For more than a century, carp have been at the base of an aquatic hierarchy that puts rough fish at the bottom, and, depending on the angler, walleye, trout, or bass at the top.

Carp aren’t the only ones. The summer 2020 issue of *Montana The Magazine of Western History* contains a related article, “The Lady and the Monster,” about how early 20th-century Montanans vilified bull trout while revering Arctic grayling, both of them native salmonids. State leaders referred to bull trout as “cannibals” and encouraged their eradication, with dynamite if necessary. Grayling, native also to England and considered the ultimate prize of gentleman anglers, were described as “aristocratic” and “elegantly formed.”

Fortunately, attitudes toward bull trout, carp, and other denigrated species are changing. Carp fishing tournaments are increasingly popular, especially among fly anglers who appreciate the fish’s speed and power. The website roughfish.com promotes fishing for and appreciating dozens of usually ignored species. Millions of dollars are being spent to protect and restore bull trout across the Northwest.

It’s encouraging to see the ranked system for fish finally come undone. And while we may not all have carp swimming in our bathtubs this holiday season, I hope we can take a clear-eyed look at other hierarchies that favor one species or group over another and agree that it’s time they were dismantled, too. 🐟