

Thanks to a visitor to this site for recommending I create a blog about issues related to the etiquette of coastal fishing. While I have resisted writing about this topic for the purposes of my monthly feature in TSF Magazine, I think this site is a perfect place to publish such a piece.

Let me start off by saying I am aware of some of the issues described below because I have been on both sides of them at some time or another. Many times, I have been subjected to the negative consequences of poor on the water etiquette, and a few times, I have been the culprit. Mostly, on the occasions when I crossed some ethical line, it was because I wasn't paying close attention to what was ahead of me while I was driving the boat. Often, I carry on a conversation with the person sitting next to me at the helm. When doing so, I know I must make an effort to keep my eyes and mind on what lies in my path, or I might do something I will later regret.

The need for etiquette starts before the boat is launched, at the boat ramp. Most people know it's not nice or friendly to back the boat onto the base of the ramp before readying it for launch. Still, I see many people doing just that, loading gear onto the boat, taking the straps off the stern, putting in the plugs, even donning waders and other gear, while the boat and truck are blocking others from using the ramp. All these things should be done before the rig is put in position to prevent others from launching.

Once the boat is in the water, an effort should be made not to use up available dock space if possible. If limited space is available, launching the boat and tying it to the dock for an extended period of time while waiting for others to arrive, for instance, is poor etiquette. This happens frequently at the boat ramp I use most often, Bird Island Basin. If more than one person is involved in the launching process, the person in the craft when it's launched should keep the boat away from the dock until the one parking the truck returns, unless no other people are around.

A similar scenario develops upon the return to the boat ramp at the end of a fishing trip. It's not friendly to pull up and tie off at the dock and remain there for an extended period of time. If only one person is involved in the process of loading the boat on the trailer, said captain should be ready to disembark and back the truck down the ramp soon after the boat is secured to a cleat. If two people will be involved in the process, the boat should never be tied to the dock at all. The person going to the truck should disembark and the one driving the boat should pull away from the dock and idle in the harbor while waiting for the trailer to be positioned on the ramp.

These issues affect the smoothness and ease of starting and ending a fishing trip; other ones crop up in places where the fishing is actually done. Basically, two lists of issues arise, those related to the rights of anglers fishing from a boat and those related to the rights of wading anglers.

When considering the rights of anglers fishing from a boat, every effort should be made to stay out of the water in which they intend to fish when passing them at speed. If said anglers are drifting, passing them well on the upwind side of their path is courteous. If they are anchored, giving them a wide berth on any side is fine.

When and if one boat stops in the same general area as another in order to drift and/or troll around and fish, every attempt should be made to stay out of the intended path of the

other boat. Maintaining distance between the crafts and paying attention to the line of the drift are critical parts of this process.

If another boat is actively pursuing a flock of working gulls or a school of redfish or drum, it is bad etiquette to attempt to encroach on the action. No one wants to "share" a flock or school with other boats. On the other hand, staying well upwind of the action and watching for other flocks or schools is okay. Sometimes, new flocks will appear, other schools will be around, or the main school will move out of range of the first boat. In such a case, no rule of etiquette would prevent one from taking advantage of the situation, provided it is done in the right way.

Most people use a trolling motor when attempting to take advantage of frenzied trout under working birds or when trying to cast at schooling reds and drum. Blasting into such a scene with no trolling motor on board and trying to use the main motor to stay in the action is bad etiquette. Captains aboard boats without trolling motors should stay far away from others attempting to employ the electric motors to maximize stealth.

The etiquette related to anglers fishing from a boat is in a way the same as it is for wading anglers. In both cases, maintaining a respectful distance from others is the key. The question is "what is a respectful distance"? I hesitate to place numbers on the concept. Tournament organizers do, some saying 100 yards is the rule, others reducing it to 25 yards.

First of all, I know people are terrible at judging distances like these, whether on the water or on land. I grew up playing golf, and have always felt my ability to judge distances is better than average, but I believe there are superior ways to measure what's respectful. In general, wading anglers probably deserve more space than those fishing from a boat.

A rule to live by when leaving room for other boating anglers is this: never get close enough so that the end of your casts can reach each other. Not only should it be impossible to cast into their boat, it should be impossible to cast where they are casting. Staying comfortably outside their casting range with your own casting range is a way to maintain a respectful distance.

With wading anglers, I'd use a different rule entirely. In fact, the etiquette related to wading anglers is more complex than etiquette related to boating anglers. The scope of the issues relates to whether one is attempting to fish out of a boat in proximity to waders, passing by a group of waders or wanting to get out and wade in proximity to a group of waders.

When attempting to fish in a boat in close proximity to wading anglers, one should be careful to avoid placing the boat in the path of the waders. Normally, people wade with the wind. Boating anglers should stay upwind of waders if possible. Additionally, they should leave more room between themselves and the waders than they would leave for other boating anglers. If one can see the expressions on the faces of the waders and hear their conversations, one is too close to the waders. People get out of a boat to wade for several reasons, mainly to enhance their stealth and so they won't be crowded together. In other words, waders don't want their own boat in the water they intend to fish; they certainly don't want the boats of others in it!

When passing groups of wading anglers, the rules are similar to those for passing anglers fishing out of a boat. Most of the time, it's possible to pass wading anglers by using deeper

water offshore of where they are wading. This is the optimal plan, but in some cases, it won't work. In places like Baffin Bay, running in the shallows along the shoreline is sometimes the only safe way to proceed through an area. If that's the case, wading anglers will be forced to accept the fact that boats will run through the area. It's bad etiquette for waders to get all excited and make rude gestures when boats pass close to them if those boats have no other legitimate choice. That's a big IF, by the way. Boaters should make every effort to pass on the offshore side of anglers where possible, never passing between them and the shoreline, if they are obviously fishing toward the shoreline.

In some places, these issues can become blurred, to say the least. On the flat just east of E Kleberg Point, for instance, deciding how to pass through multiple groups of waders can be challenging. Often, people are wading close to the bank, while others are out on both sides of the Tide Gauge Bar. In such a case, picking the biggest gap between people and blasting through it can be the only way to proceed, short of stopping and turning around. This problem is exacerbated by the Tide Gauge Bar itself, the spine of which is often too shallow to pass over.

However, if it's a Saturday (or any other crowded day) one should expect to encounter waders in this area and proceed on the outside of the bar, rather than on the flat. Doing so will eliminate the need to run through groups of waders on the flat. This is the least-followed rule of etiquette on the list, in my estimation. On crowded days, one should make every effort to make long moves in deep, open water, to avoid infringing on wading anglers in the shallows. Conversely, wading anglers should acknowledge the rights and needs of boaters and not set up near marked channels and running lanes on busy days, unless they are willing to fish in the foamy waters created by multiple boat wakes.

Those who desire to stop and wade near other wading anglers should leave a respectful distance between the anchoring site for their boat and the anglers who are already in the water. Furthermore, they should not wade toward where the other anglers are, nor where they are heading. Parking well away from a group and wading right in with them is not okay, in my opinion. People have temporary rights to the water they've chosen; those rights should be respected by staying out of those waters.

Most of the time, this rule is broken by people who have become accustomed to fishing in a particular place. If a "honey hole" is far from the dock, requiring a long, expensive boat ride, the urge to fish it can cause people to break the rules of etiquette. We've all likely felt the disappointment associated with the moment of realization that "someone is already parked in our spot". Allowing the disappointment to disorient our moral compass is unacceptable.

In the end, no one has permanent rights to a "spot". There is no such thing as "my spot", except in the ephemeral sense. When I'm standing there, it's my spot. Once I leave, it becomes fair game for anyone else. Our bays and waterways are among the few wild, public places we have left. In order to share them responsibly, we should behave in an ethical manner, respecting the rights of others and acknowledging that no purpose ("I'm trying to make a living" or "I'm in a big tournament") changes the basic rules of on the water etiquette. In the end, the rule is golden—treat others as you would have them treat you.