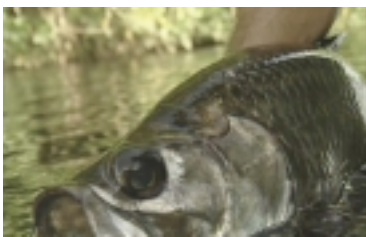




## Charlie's Cat House – *In Search of Lake Maracaibo Strain Tarpon*



©John Field 2014 | First published in Sexyloops, Tuesday, 17 November 2015

Larry Dahlberg, star of the Hunt for Big Fish, and I made four trips to Venezuela in the early 1990s to pursue a variety of species for the show. As I remember, we had a number of sponsors who directly made it possible. Guri Lake Lodge, Goldon Travel and a private oil company were the majority. We caught payara, peacock bass, redbtail and tiger catfish, pacu, blue and white marlin, sailfish, spearfish and tarpon. Larry mostly used tackle manufacturer sponsored bait or spin tackle and lures but when we finished filming with conventional gear, Larry enjoyed catching fish on a fly rod. After all, he was a fly guide for 23 years and a “good stick.” I also got to fish when we were exploring and experimenting. One of the most challenging trips was the hunt for world record tarpon, on a hunch Larry had.

Back then, the 283 pound world record tarpon from Venezuela’s Lake Maracaibo was still standing and it was thought to have been a link to the big ones caught off Senegal, Africa. It was suspected these fish migrated back and forth across the Atlantic. We were there to try and find out. Our destination was the Orinoco Delta where it flows into the Caribbean Sea. A petroleum scientist named Dr. Charlie Good traveled with us and said his company would be interested in developing tourism if we found the tarpon.

We were going camping and exploring!

We boarded two Ranger bass boats loaded with supplies and 55 gallon drums of gasoline and left the port of Barranchas. The boats were compliments of the Guri Lake Lodge. We headed down the Orinoco River like a couple of Bassmaster bosses. I was still pretty fluent in Spanish from college and was told it was a 138 mile trip to the sea. We traveled through Los Llanos, a flooded grassland plain extending from Columbia to Venezuela and home to a diversity of animals including; river dolphins and otters, storks, macaws, pumas, jaguars, crocodiles and anacondas.

It was a very long trip and we arrived around dinner time. Our sleeping area on the beach was a thatched roofed hut with a lashed bamboo platform. Our guides lit a fire so they could cook dinner. The first thing Larry and I did was seine the water for some hors d'oeuvres. A huge prawn was in the first haul and Larry grabbed it. It was quite a handful. He dropped it into the pan warming on the fire and the singed crustacean jumped back into the water several feet away! Instead, we cooked more cooperative food which the guides brought; pork cutlets.

The only adult beverage someone brought was rum and we had Gatorade, so we mixed them. It tasted good and reminded me of a Polynesian drink. Unfortunately, while off my guard, I slipped on the bamboo platform and cut my shin. The next day we were going to take a small boat and motor we also brought and navigate out to the Caribbean and north to a river in search for big tarpon.

When we started out, we motored into a slight chop, causing a little bow spray from time to time. By the time we got there a couple hours later, the waves were so big, we couldn't stay on plane and were soaked, despite our rain jackets. We knew if it didn't calm down, we'd have to bivouac somewhere until it did!

So we had to forget about that and keep our eyes open for tarpon. Larry was concentrating intensely for signs. If tarpon were there, we'd see bubbles and rolling fish. The birds are also a help, so we kept track of them and what they were focusing on. We motored around the mouth of the river and the bay inside scanning the water. After an hour we didn't have much hope left went suddenly I saw something jump that shined like a tarpon. I pointed and called out but no one else could identify it. I think it could have just been a jumping dolphin. When you see tarpon in the sun they reflect almost like chrome.

Hopes sometimes turn into hallucinations, as those of early seamen turning into visions of mermaids.

The sun was lowering and our thoughts turned to comfort. Dr. Charlie Good, who was on board, said he knew of a town up the river I think called Perdernales, where we might find refuge. The tide was low and we had a hard time motoring in the shallow river. The sky had become black and now the only lights were from the town up on a bluff above the river. We had to get out of the boat and walk through mud that smelled like sewage and climb the forty-foot bank. We were spattered from that mud and when we crested the bluff, we found ourselves on a lit sidewalk as if we were commandos waging a surprise attack.

The local folk looked at us a little sideways with our mud, fishing equipment and broadcast camera. The white light of the streetlights eerily illuminated us. Charlie said there was no lodging but there was a brothel where we could sleep. We reluctantly said yes, considering our choices. He handled the finances. We went in and each was given a (not so private) room divided by plywood walls that didn't touch the floor, just like a bathroom stall. Each room only contained a bed made of a bare sheet of plywood on blocks. There was a lit bare light bulb hanging from the low ceiling without a switch to turn it off. I placed the camera on the floor next to me to protect it and went to sleep.

When we awoke at Charlie's Cathouse, as Larry named it, we went somewhere for food and felt like we had been on a binder. The tide was high and there was once again only a light breeze rustling the palm leaves. We went down the bank like a bunch of river otters and loaded our boat. The trip back was easy but we were unsure what to make of the tarpon prospects. Maybe we were there when the tarpon were not. Maybe they would return in another season. We didn't have enough local information or facts, to be sure.

We didn't catch the giants but we were creative and made another show fishing for small tarpon. We did know there were baby tarpon around the mangroves in the delta and extensive canals to the south into Guyana. We took the boat looking and encountered flocks of scarlet ibis resting in the trees like Christmas ornaments. We also passed raised bamboo platform homes over the canals with a few women present and sometimes twenty naked or half dressed children to feed. The men were off working or making other families. It was a heartbreaking sight.

It didn't take long to find the baby tarpon. We cast as close to the mangroves as possible and under overhangs to catch them. When hooked, they jumped so high they sometimes tangled in the tree branches six feet above the water! I was also surprised how delicate their mouths were and how easily damaged. It's best to be delicate with the little ones. They're a blast on a seven-weight fly rod.

I know the tarpon fishing in nearby Trinidad is very good, with some 200 pounders caught every year. But if I really wanted to tangle with giants in the 250-pound range and bigger, on a fly, I'd try Guinea-Bissau, Angola and Sierra Leon along the west coast of Africa. I think I'd need a bigger boat.