

A Great Big Fish Story, Again!

by William Ihne

This is the second great big fish story I've written, hence the word “again” in the title. Hopefully it is the last, as I vowed never ever to catch nor kill a great big fish again. This rule, followed for nearly five years, was temporarily suspended, surprisingly so, as this story illustrates.

A gigantic fish encounter inspired the first story. After clubbing the mega-huge, toothy, monstrosously scary ling cod until it had been killed, I sat alone, bobbing in Pacific swells, listening to the splashing against the kayak. “Why?” I wondered, “had I done that to an awesome fish; an important breeder?”

I later admitted it was “ego” that led me to kill this fish. I, one man, had stood against nature, like a matador, lured and killed this great fish as planned, yet there I sat with its dead body, alone on the sea, feeling profound emptiness.

I sold the kayak- never fished from it again.

A few years after retiring as fish slayer, I begin to document and observe fish living at coral reefs in Southern Baja. All my fish captures shifted to the digital realm.

A year into this hobby, A cousin's phone call sets the wheels in motion as he described his dream to catch a huge Roosterfish from the beach using a fly rod and reel. He wanted to make this happen down in Baja where I live. I agreed to assist.

He booked a flight to La Paz, capital of Baja California Sur. I booked a fishing guide.

This same cousin on Easter morning 1966, he, a year older, age six, found all the Easter eggs hidden in the backyard of their California home, while I just stood there, pouting. Further down the road, his car

and monster models were impeccable, mine, atrocious; terribly painted, with plastic melted from too much glue.

Oddly, no rivalry ever formed, likely because I had no hope of winning. Now in our sixties, none of that matters, only a fishing trip to fulfill a dream does.

It was a beautiful day in late May, some years ago, when my cousin's flight landed in La Paz. The night before he called to ask how he'd find me. "It's a small airport," I assured him; with one arrival gate, a small crowd of twenty-five waiting, he would find me.

We sped through desert mountains in his black mid-size SUV until reaching El Sargento situated on the Sea of Cortez side of the Baja Peninsula. We ordered pizza, picked up some beer, caught up.

The next morning our guide, Humberto Cosio Lucero, a third generation local

fishing Captain, would drop us on Cerralvo, an 18-mile long oceanic island with a peak of 2,100ft. Nothing on it but endemic cactus, reptiles, birds and a herd of feral goats.

Humberto arrived before dawn. We loaded up, headed to the island in his large awning covered panga with a 150hp Honda motor. Just as the sun crested over Cerralvo, did the dolphins show-up, darting about, surfing the wake, leaping high into the air. The water cast from their soaring bodies glimmered like glittery jewels in the morning sunlight.

After a glassy glide of a ride, Humberto steered the craft onto a white sandy beach, we jumped out, unloaded our gear. Back to sea the boat went, leaving us behind.

My cousin got to work setting up the fly rods, long ones with big reels. He threaded fly line through rod loops, tied on a leader, used a no-slip loop knot to attach the fly;

meant to mimic a sardine; with the hook dressed in off-white soft bristles- like from an old man's hair brush.

"I know of no one that would wear these as earrings. Aren't flies suppose to have a little sparkle?" "No, these are good," his reply. Then handed me the pole and fly.

I once owned a fly rod. My cousin knew this, so no casting tips required... With rod in one hand, fly and fly-line in the other I set out along the sandy shore to the point; a likely spot to hook something.

This is my regret. I should have sent my cousin there before me.

Believe me, I didn't hurry to the point to catch a great big fish. I just thought it be the most sensible spot to cast from. Big fish weren't on my mind, honestly! There's no proof that I cared about such a thing. Ever since I killed that big ling cod, the desire had been extinguished, so I thought; so I claimed.

Sure, I hoped my cousin's dream would get realized, but at that moment, being surrounded by nature, well, that, and trying to remember how to use a fly rod was all that was on my mind.

Once at the point, I slipped into a fisherman's stance, pulled out some fly line from the reel and began whipping the rod or whatever you call it? "Fly Casting!" That's it.

Fly casting involves whipping the line without cracking the whip. You bring the pole back, pause to allow the fly line to lay out, then you cast forward, while feeding new line each time, thus extending the distance the fly travels with each forward cast.

I casted the fly back and forward a few times, then stopped, the fly landed. "No," I thought, "not far enough, not laid gently upon the water."

I repeated this three or four times until I was satisfied, "there." The fly line had laid down gently, with the leader line trailing and the fly landing last.

Finally, a proper presentation.

Suddenly, a giant creature appears without warning; no splash nor even a notable ripple, just a slow motion rising appearance akin to the buoyancy a submarine demonstrates as it surfaces.

I once spotted a Marlin floating like that, my first thought, "it's a Marlin!"

The big fish drifted forward eight or so inches with no visible locomotive movement; just a slow frontward motion like a crocodile's silent approach toward its prey. It then swirled and disappeared beneath the water.

I had no idea what just happened, till the line tightened and a clicking sound coming from the fly-reel accelerated. It was then I knew I had hooked an enormous, refrigerator-size Roosterfish.

The big fish swam incessantly away from shore, demanding more and more line. Unfortunately, there is no significant drag mechanism on a fly reel. Some resistance can be adjusted, but nothing that would coax a determined fish of this caliber to change its course.

I placed my hand gently against the spinning fly-reel, hoping added friction might get the fish to turn.

Though truthfully, what a fisherman wants is of no concern to a gargantuan fish as this, as it barrels out to sea, stealing the line it requires. There is no deviation from such a trajectory; it's like the fly snagged a double-decker ferry traveling to some distant destination.

By now my facial expression changed from astonishment to one of slight discontent, as it was never more clear; this wasn't my dream; this was my cousin's dream, plus my arms were already starting to tire.

I turned to my cousin, casually offering the fly rod, "Here, take the pole." Offer declined. His dream wasn't to be handed a pole with a giant fish attached. That wasn't it.

After his side to side "no" shake of the head, I reciprocated with an irritated, well manufactured, constipated smile; like one from a dissatisfied actor condemned to an unapproved script.

The big fish stole more and more line, reaching forty, fifty, sixty, followed by seventy yards out to sea. The farther the fish swam west of the island, the less hope we had that it might turn our way.

The reel clicking continued.... eighty, then ninety yards lost.

Then one hundred yards, an American football field, consumed. The big fish still not satisfied, devoured ten more.

I applied slightly more pressure to the fly reel. One hundred and twenty, then one hundred thirty, followed by one hundred and forty yards gone.

My arms weakened to the point I could barely hold the pole with one hand, applying resistance to the reel with the other. I am a big man, but not a strong man. I snorkel for exercise, which is a gentle activity, nothing like roping a steer or fighting a great big fish. I was no match for a creature possessing such monumental proportions.

With a forced smile, I turned, then asked, "Isn't this nice?" I extended the pole toward my cousin again offering the fish.

He calmly looked away; ignoring my distress; he who started all this.

While I did want this experience to instantly end, another part of me was curious to see this great fish, wondering if it might surface, though by now, having traveled so far out to sea, binoculars would be necessary to get a look at it.

The great big fish then peeled away one-hundred forty-five, then fifty-five, sixty-five, then one hundred seventy-five yards of fly line. Tension rose further as we noticed the depleted reel; not much line left; in just minutes the battle would be over.

Then, at one hundred and eighty-five yards; just fifteen yards short of the reels capacity, it happened.

The reel went silent.

The clicking stopped; all spinning halted, the line slackened. The fish had turned. The great big fish had changed its great big fish mind. It was coming home. It had changed course, now headed to where it all began; back to where we stood on a sandy point at the western slope of an oceanic, desert mountain island in the Sea of Cortez.

To describe my reeling at this point: grueling, arduous, as terribly weakened arms were now on fire with pain. Exhaustion had erased my wavering faith that this would ever end. I was on autopilot, my role, obligatory.

All I could do, turn the reel handle and gather the line that the big fish once demanded; reeling in a hundred yards first, then a hundred twenty-five.

Catching this fish wasn't my dream. Not even for a second did I adopt it as my own. Sure, I was curious to get a look at

this lock-ness rooster; the largest fish I had ever hooked, clearly a mossy back creature, old and wise as a fish can be. I was familiar with its strength and ferocity; its appetite for freedom. While I hadn't seen its entire body, I could tell from what was visible when it snatched the fly, that it was long and broad; a worthy opponent for any full grown man with a dream to catch a great big fish.

But that wasn't my dream, this wasn't my dream. I wanted "this" to end, and end now!!

With all that being true, somewhere in time; at some exact point during the battle with this Mini-Cooper size fish; a fish I tried desperately to pawn off on my cousin, something changed, like a switch had been flipped. I now wanted to land this fish right upon the shore, which was never my intent. I was simply going along for the ride, never thought it would change

direction, but once it did, and steadily headed our way, my cousin's dream took root like a contagion!

I now wanted more than anything to catch this great big fish.

The seemingly endless undertaking continued; more and more turning of the reel handle as the fish swam closer to where we stood, until finally, he was forty-yards from the beach.

My cousin handed me his "smart" phone, concerned it might get wet should he try to grab this giant from the water; should it reach the shore. Our only option to document this moment is in my pocket to stay. I didn't know how to use one, didn't own one; didn't want one, me, the guy who rejected CD's because of a perfectly fine cassette collection.

I reeled vigorously as the fish swam steadily back to where all this began; back

to the sandy point where the Rooster nabbed the fly; back to where we stood, poised with triumphant anticipation.

The big fish batted his head side to side, once maybe twice, then continued his course. Soon, he was upon us.

As the fish swam along the sea's shallow edge, I timed a good pull of the fly line right as the wind wave pushed toward shore.

Then presto, like a wave of a magic wand, the water retreated, and there he lie; bone dry on sand, a creature the size of none I have witnessed; a 40-50 pound Rooster, flopping just two times.

My cousin's pounce to capture the fish failed. He hesitated. Had it been a salmon I would have yelled "grab the *"f- - -ing"* tail NOW!" But because it was a huge old fish that wouldn't be eaten, I wasn't as concerned about its capture; just amazed to finally see it.

In an instant, the next wind wave came, bringing enough water to provide an escape, so it did, as it pitched upright, riding the swell to deeper water. Fly line peeled out as the fish fled, more line lost, more clicking and fighting the fish.

With blistered thumb and aching shoulders, I could barely hold the pole upright, but kept at it, praying this uninvited exercise would soon end.

Then the big Roosterfish turned, after a ten-minute fight; an unnecessary battle; had only my cousin just grabbed the tail and not hesitated. His determination, I suspect, wavered when he realized the disgruntled fish wouldn't take kindly to being handled.

The nearly captured big fish, now on a direct landward trajectory, required rapid reeling to rescue fallen line. I continued until the Rooster swam passed in two feet of water, my cousin tried again; he reached for the tail to no avail.

The great big, slightly worn down fish then shot out to sea one last time, but not with the same fury. After a paltry effort to break free, it turned to shore at a forty-five degree angle. I reeled swiftly hoping to coax it further.

The fish then steered a parallel course along the beach, entering shallow water, like before, I pulled as the wind wave pushed. The sea retreated, leaving the huge Rooster high and dry on land once again.

The enormous fish then rolls over the line, once, twice. With help from an incoming wind wave, off it swims. This time, without the hook. He had shook the hook loose, and disappeared into the deep blue water of the sea; free once again; no longer tethered to a dream.

The battle with a colossal fish had ended with not one photo taken; no proof that it ever happened; no rotting carcass to

support the story; no evidence to assist any claim. Nothing but a tale of one man's dream transported to another man who did his best to survive the situation.

While the great big fish had found it's freedom, so too had the fisherman who stood no longer with a look of great constipation, now, only a weary but resolute calm defined his face as he gazed out to sea.

The chain of discontentment had been broken.

Morning was still young; fly casting had just begun. I had made only one proper presentation, yet I could barely lift my arms to summon a taxi. I still wanted to fly cast some more, but for smaller fish- no big ones thank you. I didn't want to catch a great big fish ever again. Though, I worried if I continue fishing, I might hook one when I was no match for even a much, much lesser fish.

I asked my cousin again for help should I hook a hypothetical unmanageable fish, of course, that didn't go well. Finally, I accepted where he stood with regards to such a request.

I decided to quit fishing for the day. My cousin kept at it. Fortunately, Humberto caught us a nice fish for the restaurant where we ate dinner and talked about fly fishing on Cerralvo where we encountered a truly great fish.

The next day, my cousin out-fished me by a mile. He's a fly fisherman. He landed a dozen good fish, one nice dorado too. It took me forty-five minutes to hook one small Roosterfish, even with the boat surrounded by schools of dozens that Humberto had chummed using sardines.

I was reduced to being a camera man gathering footage of my cousin's conquests. He had again found all the eggs on Easter morning, except this time, I wasn't

pouting. I was glad things worked out for him, fishing wise. He had traveled a long way, and while he still carried an unfulfilled dream, he seemed satisfied; the trip had been a success.

While the big fish in the oceans and seas are in peril, they are safe from me. I will never pursue one ever again. God now knows, I have no dream to hook nor catch nor kill a great big fish anytime soon. I'll stick to photographing coral reef fish.

Hopefully, this will be the last "Great Big Fish Story" I ever write. My fingers are crossed!

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