

# Net returns small for commercial fishers

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The Janesville Gazette Staff

The future of commercial carp fishing on Lake Koshkonong and other Wisconsin lakes looks pretty murky to Steve Kallenbach.

Seining for carp has two strikes against it, Kallenbach said: a low price for the catch and a waning market for it. Those factors, combined with long hours on the lake and weeks away from home, have all but ended commercial fishing, he said.

"You have to be dropped on your head at an early age to want to be a commercial fisherman," said Kallenbach, who has pursued the golden rough fish for 25 years on the Mississippi River and various inland lakes.

"You live in a suitcase for three months a year, living out of town," said Kallenbach, whose home is on the Mississippi River. "If you want to live like a dog, it's a way to make a living.

"The old fishermen are dying, and there are no new fishermen."

Kallenbach and his partner, John Bruring, of Stoddard hold the commercial fishing rights to the lake. They fished for two weeks in March and took out 275,000 carp--400,000 pounds.

The fishermen sold their catch to Stoller Fisheries in Spirit Lake, Iowa, for 8 to 10 cents a pound. In 1975, the price was 6 to 8 cents.

"For some reason, the price of fish has never gone up with inflation," Kallenbach said at his headquarters, where he and Bruring are building and repairing equipment for the coming season.

"Most of the lakes where we fish there are subsidies," Kallenbach said. "We get paid to take the fish out, and we get paid for the fish. There is no subsidy in Lake Koshkonong. The only reason we fish is because of the buffalo."

Buffalo is a carp-like fish valued by some Asians for its white flesh. The fishermen ship them live to New York City where they fetch 50 or 60 cents a pound.

"That's one of the things I'm trying to steer the lake associations toward," said Don Bush, Rock River basin fish biologist for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, referring to a possible subsidy.

"We really need to continue the harvesting," Bush said. "Stocking game fish without removing carp won't be successful. You are stocking fish on top of an existing population."

Lake interests should provide a reason for commercial fishing on Koshkonong in case of a market collapse, Bush said. Stoller Fisheries is nearly the only market for Koshkonong carp.

"There's nobody that wants to take over buying them," Kallenbach said. "There used to be markets all up and down the Mississippi River. They're all closed now. All your ma and pa fish markets have gone out of business."

Consumers won't buy whole fish and clean them anymore, he said.

"The new generation doesn't want to do anything," Kallenbach said. "If you can't bring it up on a computer screen, they don't want to deal with it."

People on Lake Koshkonong don't seem to want to deal with commercial fishing, either, Kallenbach said, though carp must be removed for sport fishing to thrive.

"On Lake Koshkonong, we can't even find a place to stay," Kallenbach said. "You stay in a motel and that gets expensive. So far, I haven't noticed that it's been open arms at Lake Koshkonong."

The lakes that pay subsidies are much more welcoming, Kallenbach said. Lake property owners and sport fishers on Koshkonong, by contrast, have complained about the commercial fishers, he said.

"They go out in their front yard, and they don't want to see a big net across it," he said. "They don't want you there."

If the commercial fishers find fish and decide to set their net, they have no choice but to fish that area. Pole fishers who plan to fish certain bays on certain days get angry when they are blocked by the seiners, Kallenbach said.

Duck hunters whose prey is frightened from the lake by the commercial fishing get angry, too, he said.

"If you find fish where a guy wants to go duck hunting, you just made another enemy," Kallenbach said. "There are a lot of lawyers that duck hunt. They've got a lot more money than a poor carp fisherman."

Lake associations at Beaver Dam Lake, Lake Puckaway and Buffalo Lake have subsidized the carp removal. But organizations on Koshkonong apparently believe that the sale of fish is compensation enough.

"There's a lot of fish in Koshkonong, but it takes a lot of net to catch 'em," Kallenbach said. "Five thousand feet of net takes all day to fish. Also, it's a long way away--two and a half hours. The only fishing crews are on the Mississippi River."

Koshkonong is famous for its wind and for getting rough fast.

"The wind blows a lot, there," Kallenbach said. "You can lose everything you've got. And you can die."

Other commercial fishers have given up on Lake Koshkonong because of the politics, poor markets, poor catches or lack of subsidy, Kallenbach said.

He and Bruring will be out there on the barge with a mile of net and a crew of six come September, though, despite the economics of modern commercial fishing.

"It's not just a job; it's an adventure," Kallenbach said, quoting a Navy recruiting slogan.

Those not reared in the traditions of the barge and net never last, he said.

"You have to be born into it to do it."

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