

# AdAge

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## **FISHING HOOKS MILLIONS AS THE HOT NEW PANDEMIC PASTIME**

### **A 'WHITE GUY' SPORT GETS MORE DIVERSE AS PEOPLE SEEK A HOBBY TO REPLACE ATTENDANCE AT LIVE SPORTS OR ESCAPE FROM HOME OFFICES**

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A 'white guy' sport gets more diverse as people seek a new hobby to replace attendance at live sports or escape from home offices.



**Credit: Brown Folks Fishing**

Fishing seems like a thing millennials would have killed by now—a slow-moving hobby disproportionately beloved by older white guys.

But the sport actually has gotten bigger than ever thanks to the pandemic, attracting millions of new participants and reactivating millions more lapsed anglers. And data show fishing already had momentum going into the pandemic, particularly among women and Hispanics, as the industry encourages diversity. By the way, you needn't travel far to fish, even in Los Angeles, where fly fishing in the L.A. River is actually a thing.

Walmart executives said on an earnings call last month that their research shows active anglers in the U.S. increased by around 10 million to 35 million during the pandemic. That's made it hard for the giant retailer to keep shelves stocked with tackle, particularly starter rods and reels.

Sales of fishing gear also have soared at Dick's, Bass Pro Shops and Cabela's. Since June, fishing-intensive retailers Bass Pro Shops and Cabela's have seen increases in household penetration of 10 percent and 14 percent, respectively, vs. the year-ago period, according to tracking firm Numerator. And a larger portion of their shoppers are also younger (ages 21-34) and have children, boding well for the future.

The Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation pegs the total number of U.S. fishing participants higher than Walmart at 50.1 million as of 2019 with a net gain of 700,000 net new participants last year. The pandemic has stoked even more interest. An RBFF survey found resident fishing license applications surged 10.2 percent nationwide from January to April vs. a year ago, capturing only the start of the pandemic effect. A separate RBFF study finds one in five Americans now say they're more likely to go fishing than before the pandemic.

### **'A ton of new people'**

Near fishing lakes, like that at East Fork State Park near Cincinnati, it can be hard to find parking spots some mornings.

"We've seen a ton of new people getting into it," says Ted Nicholson, manager and fly fishing instructor at Delamere & Hopkins, a Cincinnati outdoor retailer.

"The pandemic is driving a lot of it," Nicholson says. "A lot of people are working at home, so they realize they can get out." He believes others are turning to it as a new hobby because they can't attend live sports or other events.

The demand has made it hard to keep products on shelves, with some shipments coming in at only 10 to 20 percent of what's ordered, Nicholson says. A spokeswoman for the American Sportfishing Association trade group says the pandemic caused supply-chain problems in Asia even as it fueled demand in the U.S.

"We're seeing an explosion in fly fishing unlike anything we've seen since the movie 'A River Runs Through It' came out [in 1992]" says Maggie Edmunds, public relations and brand marketing manager of outdoor retailer Orvis. Online traffic has increased in particular, with an emphasis on rods, reels and other products for beginners. Fortunately

for Orvis, Edmunds says, almost all its rods are made near its headquarters in Vermont and supply hasn't otherwise been an issue.

### **Boost in marketing spending**

Not content to rely on the pandemic alone, Orvis has increased digital ad spending and organic distribution of branded content, including making its Fly Fishing 101 course, historically taught only in stores, available for free online. Engagement on the Orvis fly fishing blog is up 30 percent this year, and up 40 percent on its social channels, Edmunds says.

Part of Orvis' plan is to make fly fishing more accessible, she says, adding that it's already cheaper to start than many hobbies, such as skiing. "It doesn't have to be the grand plan, a fancy lodge in Montana or Washington or Cape Cod. As long as you have a rod, you can really fish anywhere." So Orvis is launching a "Mini-Adventure" campaign this fall to encourage people to get out on their home waters.

Still, fishing, particularly fly fishing, has an image as a hobby for white guys – think the intro with Andy and Opie from the Andy Griffith Show or the all-white cast of "A River Run Through It." That's an image the industry broadly, and Orvis in particular, wants to shake.

"I think it gets a bad rap for being a wealthy, older, white man sport," Edmunds says. "We've been working really hard at Orvis to make it more inclusive."

So the retailer launched a #50/50 on the Water campaign in 2017 aimed at increasing female participation. And it's been working with the group Brown Folks Fishing since July as part of the latter's "Angling for All Pledge" to increase racial diversity.

### **Outreach to women, people of color**

The broader industry has been increasing outreach to women and people of color too—with such RBFF efforts as Women Making Waves and Vamos a Pescar (Spanish for "Let's Go Fishing"). The effort appeared to be paying off. RBFF finds participation grew faster than the general population from 2016 to 2019 among females—3 percent annually—particularly teen females ages 13-17—up 6 percent annually.

The fishing participation rate for Hispanics reached a record 12 percent last year (though still well below 17 percent for the general population), according to RBFF. Hispanics went on an average of 20.3 annual outings compared to 17.5 for the general population.

But while participation among Blacks also grew faster than the general population, participation declined among Asians and remains overwhelmingly white (79 percent), male (64 percent), and high-income (with 27 percent from households with incomes of \$100,000 or more).

But you really don't have to be rich to start, Edmunds says. "All you really need is a rod, reel, a little bit of leader and some flies. You can spend a couple of hundred dollars on a rod if you want, but you don't have to. You can spend a hundred bucks."

Tracy Nguyen-Chung, founder of Brown Folks Fishing, learned the sport while growing up in Portland from her father, a Vietnamese refugee who was a subsistence fisherman there. She stopped fishing for a while and moved to Los Angeles after graduate school. Then, when she returned to fishing and looked for information, she "found whether it was online or in marketing or generally in the public space of fishing, I rarely saw the faces of my community reflected at all." That led her to start Brown Folks Fishing in 2018 to help address that gap for BIPOC (Black, indigenous and people of color) anglers.

Orvis was the first marketer to sign on to the group's pledge, which creates a curriculum and action plan to address racism and inequality in fishing. More recently Patagonia Fishing and the groups Casting for Recovery and United Women on the Fly have joined, Nyguyen-Chung says.

She credits the RBFF for trying to improve diversity in fishing, and says Orvis moving beginner classes online helps because many of its and other fishing stores where classes are taught tend to be in more white, suburban communities. But she also sees a need for a community where BIPOC people can share stories—including how it's very possible to fish in Los Angeles during the pandemic.

"We know that BIPOC communities have less access to green spaces in general," she says. "Yet L.A. always has had a culture of bass fishing or fishing in more urban locations.

As those narratives get shared more widely, people will see that, oh, I can go to Echo Park and just cast a line, or the L.A. River is a world-class carp fishery.”

Inline Play

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