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Can of Worms

***Diplocardia mississippiensis** is a hardy, muscular earthworm found in the Florida Panhandle and prized by fishermen. For years locals gathered and sold these earthworms with little federal interference. Now the situation has changed*

by Kenneth Brower

(*The online version of this article appears in three parts. Click here to go to part two. Click here to go to part three.*)

Insurrection

IN the peak months of March, April, and May earthworms bring $25 to $28 a can to the baiters who grunt for worms in the sandy soils of Apalachicola National Forest. In the flatwoods of the Florida Panhandle baiting is not the act of threading worm on

hook but an earlier step -- the extraction of the worm from the ground. To "grunt" -- or "scrub," or "rub" -- for worms, the baiter drives a wooden stake into the earth. The stake, carved from black gum, or cherry, or white hickory, is called a stob -- a fine old word, a Medieval English survival by way of Scots dialect transplanted to the southern woods. The baiter drives in the stob one-handed, with blows from the long bar he calls his iron. Then, kneeling, he grips the iron firmly at both ends. Leaning his weight into the task, like a man planing wood, he strokes the length of the iron repeatedly and rhythmically over the top of the stob, producing a deep metallic croaking. The sound is vibrant, interrogative, lovesick, alien, like the mating call of some giant amphibian in an iron mine on Mars.

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"The Rancher Subsidy," by Todd Oppenheimer (January, 1996)
The West's

East of the Ochlockonee River, in the soft soil of Wakulla County, the stob is huge. The baiters there -- "those Sopchoppy boys," as they are known on the other side -- use a flat, heavy iron with a kind of paddle grip cut into one end. Around the little Wakulla County town of Sopchoppy heavy gear seems to work best. West of the Ochlockonee, in the firmer, more resonant soil of Liberty County, the stob is smaller, and the iron more delicate and graceful -- a curving length of steel cut from the leaf spring of a car or truck. On either side of the river the technique is the same. With his iron held edge-on, the baiter knocks in his stob. Turning the iron flat side downward, he commences grunting. When he has hit the stob five or six licks, a magical thing

happens. For reasons unknown to science but resonatingly clear to worms, the song of the iron drives pale legions of annelids from the safety of their tunnels. The baiter becomes a Pied Piper of worms. The finest bait in the entire South -- finest, some say, on the planet -- begins appearing everywhere on the surface of the ground.

When, some time ago, the National Forest Service announced an increase in the permit fee for grunting, the baiters rebelled. For many years they had been paying $30 annually for a permit to harvest an unlimited number of worms. Henceforth they would be required to pay a tax of $3.00 a can (each can holds 500 worms). A few weeks after the announcement an angry crowd of more than a hundred gathered outside the Apalachicola District Ranger Station, in the little town of Bristol. Andrew Colaninno, the district ranger, was stunned by the size of the gathering. He had underestimated the number of men and women who grunt under the longleaf pines of his district. He had completely misjudged their mood.

In announcing the fee increase, Colaninno had accomplished a kind of grunt of his own. A host of baiters appeared magically, as if out of the ground.

The mob of baiters had dwindled to about forty by the time I arrived. Among them were two old black men, one black woman, and a dark-haired woman with a trace of a

fabled ranchers are in trouble. The damage done to the land by cattle has become a contentious environmental issue. The ranchers' greatest enemy, though, is the free market.

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From *Research Reporter,* a publication of the University of Georgia.

Annelid Worm Biodiversity Resources
"A guide to information on annelids, and current worm research and researchers." Posted at the Biodiversity and Biological Collections Web Server -- a site "devoted to information of interest to systematists and other biologists of the organismic kind."

harelip who looked part Native American. The rest were white folk with origins mainly in the British Isles, I would guess: Scots and Irish faces altered in some recognizable but indefinable way by several generations in the southern flatwoods. A television truck was parked at the curb. The reporter, a youngish man in a three-quarter-length leather coat, was holding a microphone up to a baiter named Charles McCranie, who seemed to be the spokesman for the group. The other baiters had formed a circle and were leaning in to hear.

"When we first heard about the increase, my wife called over here to Bristol," McCranie was saying. "They played pass the buck. They told her to call Tallahassee. So I called Tallahassee and talked to a Mr. Riser, and Mr. Riser passed the buck back to Bristol. He told me that Mr. Colaninno, the head sergeant at the work station in Bristol, he is the one that instated this rule. All by his little self. So I called back over here to Bristol. And I asked him, 'What qualifies you to set the fee? What do you know about bait harvesting? The bait business? The condition of the earthworm in the forest?'"

McCranie was a man of middle height, in his late twenties. He had an Elvis-like abundance of auburn hair that brushed the back of his collar, and his face culminated in an impressive nose. He appeared to have shaved very close that morning. The preternatural smoothness of his cheeks set

him apart from the other male baiters, who tended to be stubbly. He wore a thin gold chain around his neck and a shirt of a lightweight, silky synthetic. His teeth chattered a little, partly from the thinness of his shirt in the cool of the morning, I guessed, and partly from the adrenaline of debate.

"This three-dollar-per-can cost," the reporter said. "What kind of increase is that over what is already being paid?"

"You cain't ... ," McCranie began, his voice rising. "You cain't ... ," He brought his indignation under control and lowered his pitch. "You can't even compute it. Until now we've paid thirty dollars for a year-round permit, an unlimited-harvest permit. *Three dollars a can!* There's no way we can afford to do that and stay in business. I mean, there's no way. Period. This is a nickel-and-dime business. You make all your profit in nickels and dimes. If you start cutting a nickel and dime here and there, you don't make any money. Period."

The crowd of baiters murmured their assent.

"My wife and I are buyers," McCranie went on. "We're paying twenty-five or twenty-eight dollars a can, and we're making about thirty. We end up making about two or three dollars a can. If Mr. Colaninno takes three dollars a can, that kills the bait business. Period. You can't pass that on to the consumer, because the market won't bear it.

It's already high enough when they get to Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, south Florida, because there are so many middlemen along the way. What we're upset about is nobody come to us and asked us. Mr. Colaninno made his decision on his own. Nobody asked us if we thought we should put it to a vote. They just said, 'This is the way it's gonna be, and it's best for you to go along with it.' None of us can. We can't afford to. We're not going to."

The reporter and his cameraman exchanged glances. This about wraps it, their eyebrow language suggested, and the reporter allowed the microphone to drop a little from McCranie's mouth. The dip of the microphone did not go unnoticed by the baiters. Their fifteen seconds of television fame were over.

"When you say you're not going to put up with it, what do you mean?" I asked.

With a speed that surprised me, the crowd began dissolving around the videocamera and reassembling around me.

"We're not gonna pay it," McCranie answered. "We're gonna go out anyway. Everybody here will tell you. We're gonna go as long as we want to. We're willing, just like I told Mr. Colaninno, to work with them any way they want us to. I'm willing to go with the biologists to the forest -- to take 'em where I bait, and show 'em how. We're willing to do anything. We don't want to work outside the law. Like I told him, we want to be in line with the laws of the forest. We don't litter. We don't tear up fences. We don't want to be outside the law. But it's got to be something reasonable that we can all live with."

Junior Coxwell, the biggest bait buyer in Calhoun County, approached the crowd from across the street. Fifty yards away Coxwell seemed to notice the television van for the first time. He stopped abruptly, turned, and walked back the way he had come. A small, pale baiter named Raydell observed Coxwell's pirouette. Interrupting McCranie, Raydell called the crowd's

attention to Coxwell's departure: "He seen the TV man here, so he left."

Raydell wore an odd little stingy-brim hat and a beard trimmed carefully along the angle of his jaw. He seemed to take a grim satisfaction in the defection of Junior Coxwell. A few of the baiters chuckled at Coxwell's retreat, a few smiled fleeting sardonic smiles, but no one seemed to feel for Coxwell quite the animosity that Raydell felt. Charles McCranie watched the buyer's departing back without expression and then continued.

"Mr. Colaninno told me on the phone, 'We don't expect one hundred percent compliance.' I said, 'Well, you're gonna get zero percent compliance.'" McCranie seemed offended that Colaninno should expect a certain amount of lawbreaking by the baiters. The new fee was all about revenue for the Forest Service, in McCranie's opinion. "There's no doubt in my mind that the population has declined," he said. "You can ask anybody that's baited all their life. When they were little kids, it was nothing to get a thousand or fifteen hundred worms to the grunt. Now you hardly ever see that many. But *we* don't want to exterminate the earthworm. This is our livelihood." The real threat, McCranie suggested, came less from baiters than from the Forest Service itself. If anything had the potential to exterminate the worm, it would be the agency's prescribed burning in short cycles. Here Raydell leaned in to agree

fervently.

"They're hurting earthworms just as bad as we are!" Raydell cried. "The gov'ment!" Raydell's gaunt face had gone rigid with anger, and his jaw muscle squirmed, vermiculate, inside the angle of his beard.

"We bait on the burns," McCranie explained. "We all can bait on the grass, too, but we like to stay on those burns. It's easier for us. We can see the worms better. When they burn a piece of property every two or three years, they need to close it -- because everybody goes there and baits it. In springtime there might be a thousand people on that burn in one morning. In three or four days the baiters have harvested the vast majority of the worms that's on it. If the Forest Service burns that same piece of property again within two or three years, those earthworms haven't had time to raise back. They haven't had time to reproduce and repopulate that area. Then it gets hit again, so there's hardly any left. What the Forest Service has got to do is wait five or ten years between burns. If they do burn a piece of property every three years, they got to close it. And when they close it, they're gonna have to put somebody there to set on it. They need to post it and enforce it, or somebody's gonna bait it."

Annette McCranie, listening to her husband hold forth, smiled and shook her head. "They could of had this meeting with just Chuck," she said. "He ain't gonna shut up."

"I don't want him to shut up," said one of the black men, a seventy-five-year-old baiter named Charlie Williams.

"He's good at talking, ain't he?" Annette McCranie said.

"Yeah," Williams said. "I don't want anybody to shut him up."

The crowd generated a peculiar electricity. In the faces I thought I could detect a new euphoria in combat with an old fatalism. This morning appeared to have been an awakening. The baiters were all acquaintances, yet they seemed only now to have realized their fraternity -- to have sensed that they had a collective power. Today felt like the beginning of something, yet at the same time it was anachronistic -- a scene from the 1930s, something out of Steinbeck. "There are thousands of us," McCranie said. "There was probably a hundred here this morning, but that's a drop in the bucket. All of us baiters, whether we buy bait, sell bait, or whatever, we all need to be together on this thing."

The TV reporter and cameraman were long gone, having entered the ranger station to record the Forest Service's side of the story. Reluctantly the crowd of baiters began to break up. Men would start off and then sidle back to hear some more. Four or five were talkers, the rest listeners.

"Well, I'm gonna leave, y'all," Charlie Williams announced finally. "I'm going on."

"All right, I'll give you a call," McCranie said. "Let me get your phone number, Charlie."

After an exchange of numbers, Williams and McCranie shook hands warmly and then embraced. A general search for pens and slips of paper and a scribbling of phone numbers followed. I lost several sheets of my notebook to the cause. Everyone promised to keep in touch. In his enthusiasm, Charlie Williams threw his big black arm around the narrow shoulders of Raydell, the angry white baiter in the stingy-brim hat. Raydell stiffened visibly in his grasp.

In the dry forests of the Far West, insurrections against the Forest Service and other land-stewardship agencies have been collectively called the Sagebrush Rebellion. The Apalachicola is subtropical forest, completely devoid of sage. Some other emblematic plant was needed. Maybe what had rung out this morning, I decided, was the first shot of the Palmetto Rebellion.

Continued...

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Kenneth Brower is a frequent contributor to *The Atlantic,* specializing in ecological issues.

Illustrations by Barry Blitt

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