



Live-Release Boat Helping Sportfishing

By STEVE PRICE

If you have attended any B.A.S.S. tournaments lately, you've probably seen the silver-and-blue Shimano pontoon boat floating nearby. It's the boat that gets all the fish after the competitors catch them, and lets them go again.

Releasing fish at tournaments, however, is only part of Shimano's far-reaching Sport Fisheries Initiative program. Now in its fifth year, the agenda also includes research as well as education, and stretches from the Atlantic to the Pacific in both the United States and Canada. There are nine boats in the Shimano fleet, and at least one is on the water somewhere every weekend of the year.

"It's very gratifying to think we're putting something back into the sport," explains Shimano's Phil Morlock, who, as a tournament angler himself, conceived the idea of the Initiative and the release boats. In fact, he was competing in a tournament with Tom Brooke, Shimano-Canada CEO, when the idea struck.

"Fishermen and hunters have long made personal commitments to better their sports," Morlock says, "but this is a corporate commitment, and it's working."

"What's even better is the support we're receiving from other fishing companies, such as Outboard Marine Corp., Mercury and Mariner, Lowrance and Ranger, and even the U.S. and Canadian governments. It's a type of partnership where we're all working together."

At present, there are eight pontoon-type release boats located across the United States and eastern Canada. They are custom-built by Prince Craft in Princeville, Ontario, and each has four separate 125-gallon water tanks with aeration, refrigeration and water recirculation systems, as well as bottom-release capabilities.

The pontoon boats and their trailers are structurally reinforced to handle the heavy weight of water. The boats can be trailered full of water and fish to release sites miles away from weigh-in locations.

During the 1994 BASS Masters Classic[®] in Greensboro, N.C., for example, a Shimano boat released alive all but nine of the 374 bass caught in High Rock Lake, which is nearly an hour's drive away from the weigh-in arena.

The ninth boat is in the fleet in a Ranger Sportfisher, which has been outfitted with two 100-gallon water tanks and is being used to study the disastrous decline in the salmon and steelhead fisheries in the Pacific Northwest. It is presently in Vancouver Island, British Columbia.

Other research projects include the Lake Havasu Fisheries Improvement Program, in which Shimano donated a specially-designed pontoon boat to the Bureau of Land Management to carry man-made structures offshore



Shimano's release boat disperses tournament-caught bass and enhances long-term survival rates.

Photo: Gerald Crawford

for placement as fish habitat.

The boats have also been used to stock rainbow trout on the Colorado River; walleye in various Wisconsin lakes; and even tiger muskies in Arkansas. After Hurricane Andrew wiped out the largemouth bass fishery in Louisiana's Atchafalaya Basin, Shimano made a release boat available for re-stocking efforts there, too.

"This past summer, one of our boats visited more than 50 summer camps in Ontario and helped teach youngsters about fishing and basic fish biology," noted Morlock, "and I anticipate we'll be doing more of that in the future. We received a lot of positive response from the kids who participated."

"The demand for the release boats far exceeds our ability to fulfill the requests," Morlock concludes, "but we've made a long-term commitment, so we'll continue a step at a time."

