

SHARING

Their Passion for

FISHING

Written by Dave Lucchesi



THREE LANDOWNERS PROVIDE
FISHING OPPORTUNITIES
FOR THE DISADVANTAGED...
AND PROVIDE AN EXCELLENT
EXAMPLE OF WHAT
LIVING IN SOUTH DAKOTA
IS ALL ABOUT.



*F*or as long as I can remember, Game, Fish and Parks fisheries staff has received unusual requests for fish. These requests were not for northern pike or walleyes, but for odd species such as goldeye, freshwater drum, pumpkinseed and shorthead redhorse. "Interesting species, but why in the world would someone want to stock them in their pond?" I wondered. However, Norm Kopecky, the person making the requests, had a plan. It was to provide a unique fishing experience for disadvantaged anglers at his pond. When I told Norm I would like to present his story in a Digest article, he insisted that the write-up include similar efforts by John Alvarez and Lauren Christensen, South Dakotans who also provide fishing opportunities for the disadvantaged. Kopecky hopes that publicizing these examples will inspire other pond owners to provide fishing opportunity for the disadvantaged, elderly and youth.

Kopecky, a native of Bellwood, Nebraska, has always been interested in natural diversity. He received college degrees in biology, business and psychological counseling, and served as a naturalist at several locations. In 2000, Kopecky started to dig a fishing pond on his property near Worthing, South Dakota. Seven years later, the 4-acre pond dotted with seven islands was completed. This pond now serves as a fishing destination for 200 - 250 anglers annually. Anglers include participants in programs such as DakotAbilities and School for the Visually Handicapped as well residents of nursing homes and disadvantaged individuals.

People visiting Norm's pond enjoy fast fishing for a wide variety of species including smallmouth bass, largemouth bass, wipers, walleye, goldeye, and various sunfish. Kopecky remarked, "Participants like high catch rates for a good variety of high quality fish." Interestingly, he mentioned that his participants, like anglers all across the Dakotas, are still a little "walleye crazy."

Kopecky's guests can fish from a 32 foot long covered dock with safety railings. Another popular fishing location is on a bridge leading to one of the seven islands scattered around the pond. Kopecky provides the tackle and bait and has a volunteer assisting each angler. He insists on using circle hooks to minimize hooking mortality. His pond has been featured in two articles in the Pond Boss Magazine, including one that highlighted a South Dakota State University study on fish condition.



Guests and volunteers at the Christensen property take a wagon ride from the lunch area to the fishing pond (top); Sharky is all smiles after catching this beautiful bass at my Fishing Pond on the Alvarez property (middle left, photo by John Alvarez); Kyle Mueller with a nice bluegill (middle center, photo by Lydia Lacchezi); a big bass caught by happy angler, Lester Wallenberg at the Kopecky pond (middle right, photo by Norm Kopecky); residents of Pioneer Memorial Nursing Home in Viborg fishing at my Fishing Pond (bottom, photo by John Alvarez).

John Alvarez of Bridgewater, South Dakota, suffered a traumatic brain injury in a 1992 auto accident. He realized that one form of therapy was fishing with his son, Trevor, on Wolf Creek near his home. That spawned the idea to provide the same opportunity for others with similar injuries. His vision began to materialize in 1998 with a 4-year project to construct a 130 foot long by 50 foot wide pond.

In 2002, the Alvarez pond hosted 36 anglers from the Children's Care Hospital and School in Sioux Falls. By 2009, Alvarez was host to over 400 disadvantaged and elderly anglers from across southeastern South Dakota. Anglers caught a variety of species including largemouth and smallmouth bass that tipped the scales at 3 to 5 pounds. Everyone is provided with a meal as part of their fishing experience.

Alvarez told me several of his favorite stories including one involving an angler named Bob who, with only one good hand and no legs, managed to land a fish without any assistance. His excitement was overwhelming. My favorite story was of a 110 year old Salem woman, who after landing a big largemouth bass, had slumped over in her chair. Alvarez, concerned about her condition, asked if she was alright and she replied, "I just caught a big fish; I need a nap!"

During the winter, Alvarez conducts fundraisers to help support his dream. Donations provided by participating organizations and the efforts of volunteers help defray the costs of his efforts. More information on his non-profit organization can be found at MyFishingPond.com.

Lauren Christensen, now retired from the South Dakota Soybean Council and United Soybean Board, provides a variety of activities including fishing, horseback riding

and wagon rides on his property northwest of Trent, South Dakota. He became involved when a friend asked if his son and other children from the School for the Deaf in Sioux Falls could fish his 3/4 acre pond. Thirteen years later, his pond and property are host to weekly guests from organizations including South Dakota Achieve, DakotAbilities and Advance.

Visitors can fish for bluegills and trout in his pond, creek chubs in the creek meandering through his property or channel catfish in the Big Sioux River. Local horse owners also provide horseback and wagon riding opportunities for guests. I became a little choked up when he talked about the experience of watching disadvantaged kids catch their first fish or ride a horse for the first time. He feels strongly that landowners have a responsibility to share their land with those less fortunate.

I believe that many of us working in the fisheries profession not only



*Casey Pourrier with a nice goldeye caught at my Fishing Pond.
Photos by John Alvarez*

share a passion for fisheries and fishing, but have experienced the joy that helping others catch fish can bring. Most of us have participated in a kids' fishing day, or an event that provides fishing opportunity to disadvantaged anglers like Catch a Rainbow. However, as fisheries professionals serving a diversity of customers, our primary mission to provide fishing for the general public does not leave much time to focus on specialized opportunities. Fortunately, we have caring individuals who are willing to do just that!



*The Catholic Foresters of Sioux Falls help youth to fish off the Christensen dock.
Photo by Lydia Laubert*