Suckers might have had a poor reputation in the past, but smart anglers such as author Nicholas Sainaia know the value of these abundant fish.

Learn to love a sucker

IF THERE’S ONE BORN EVERY MINUTE, THAT’S A GOOD THING.

Nicholas Sainaia

It was a fine April day as I drove to one of my favorite streams, one of those first truly nice days of spring when instead of 45 degrees and rainy, it was finally sunny and in the 60s. Unfortunately upon getting out of my car, my first breath was not that of sweet spring air, but rather the gag-inducing stench of rotting fish.

The source of this smell? Dozens of dead suckers that were caught, then left to die and decompose on the stream bank.

Let’s face it, treating suckers this way isn’t something new and it’s a mindset that might be shared by many who fish. I must admit that years ago, I also thought these odd-looking horse-lipped fish were nothing but a garbage species.

Why have these fish often been treated with such disdain by so many, especially in the past? Likely, it’s because of the way we were taught collectively by others to view these fish. They are bottom feeders … they eat walleye, bass and perch eggs … they are invasive … they taste bad and you’d never want to eat one … they are full of pollutants … they only live in dirty water. The list of criticisms have gone on and on.

Educated anglers already know the value of suckers to their local ecosystem. But let’s put all of the lies — or at the very least greatly exaggerated misconceptions — about these fish to rest once and for all.

Identifying a sucker

To address many of the myths regarding suckers, you first have to get to know the sucker family.

The Wisconsin Fish Identification guide (wiscfish.org), lists five species of fish known as suckers. In addition, six species of fish known as redhorse also are grouped here (Catostomidae family), along with a handful of others such as quillback, carpsucker and chubsucker. Despite their resemblance to the invasive carp, all are native to Wisconsin waters.

The fish generally are distinguished by their coloring with a few differences also in scales, body pattern, fin and lip. This
extended “sucker” family gets its obvious name from the downward-facing vacuum mouth and, on some species, almost eerily human lips.

Before fishing, anglers need to be aware that some suckers are on the state endangered-threatened species list and these may not be harvested. That includes the black redhorse, which is endangered, and the blue sucker and river redhorse, both of which are threatened. The ability to identify species when fishing is a must.

For the sake of simplicity, this article will mostly apply to two of the major family members: the common or white sucker, and a couple of species in the redhorse clan.

Myths busted
Now that we’ve addressed what makes a sucker, let’s talk about those myths.

They eat fish eggs: This one has some truth to it, yet has been greatly exaggerated. Yes, suckers do eat the eggs of other fish, but the majority of eggs consumed by suckers are their own, eaten during their spawning run. When they do eat other eggs, it’s usually random and not shown to harm those fish populations.

They are bad-tasting bottom feeders: Yes, suckers do feed on the bottom. With that mouth, they are built for it. But does that translate to them tasting bad? Not necessarily.

The description of “bottom feeder” conjures a visual of a fish shoveling muck and pollutants into its mouth like a hungry hippo. But that simply is not so. The stream where I do my sucker fishing, for example, happens to be part of a classified trout stream, so suckers here are eating mayfly larvae, earth worms, caddis fly larvae, hellgrammites, minnows, crayfish and other small invertebrates. I’ve even seen suckers turn themselves upside-down to suck adult mayflies from the surface of the stream.

There is another fish with a diet like that — the revered trout. It’s also the diet of the bluegill, perch and crappie, and what northern, walleye and bass eat as juveniles. So the diet of the sucker isn’t that much different than that of the gamefish we love to catch and eat. The sucker just has a different mouth to go about its eating business.

They’re not good eating: This idea is incorrect as well. Suckers, especially those caught in the cool waters of spring, are great eating.

There is one shortcoming they do admittedly have: They are quite bony. But there are ways around the bones to get to their sweet flesh. Fish patties made with potatoes, onions, egg and ground sucker meat are a true springtime delicacy.

Another method involves scoring the sucker fillets with a fillet knife every half inch or so, then frying them. The oil penetrates between the score marks and cooks the bones into nonexistence. Suckers also are fantastic when smoked or pickled.

When to find them
Suckers can be taken almost any time of the year, even through the ice. However, the most common season to fish for suckers is in the spring. That’s when these fish congregate by the thousands, perhaps even tens of thousands, depending on where you are fishing.

The run usually reaches its peak for suckers and redhorse in late March through late April, depending on location and the species that’s prevalent. Waters to the north typically warm later than those in the south, so factor that in to your planning.

Suckers and redhorses are among the most abundant and widespread fishes in the state. Basically, every tributary to Lake Michigan and Lake Superior, along with the Mississippi, Wisconsin, Rock and Fox rivers and many feeder creeks to large lakes will have some kind of sucker run. But your chances of finding suckers in large numbers go way up when you can find a dam, natural or manmade, where they might congregate.

The beauty of fishing for suckers is its simplicity. Just half a crawler, weighted to the bottom, is all you need to fill a cooler.

Respect is learned
Because so much negativity may have surrounded the sucker in the past, it’s easy to overlook the positives they bring to the waters and ecosystems in which they live. Smart anglers know suckers are a big food source for wall-eyes, northern, catfish and other gamefish. Contrary to popular belief, all suckers, especially the redhorse species, need clean water to survive, and their presence is a barometer of stream health and cleanliness.

I remember the first time I decided to go sucker fishing and hooked my first one, a silver redhorse. I was amazed at how hard the fish fought, every bit as game as a smallmouth bass. And when I finally landed the fish — yes, that mouth takes some getting used to, but the fish itself is beautiful, especially those in the redhorse family with their large, transparent scales and blood-red fins.

As I caught and kept several large suckers, all bigger than 20 inches, my respect for what I once viewed as an ugly bottom feeder grew. Now whenever I catch a nice redhorse, I don’t see an ugly, bad-tasting, rough fish; I see a beautiful gamefish.

Every spring my friends and I eagerly await the sucker run. Fishing for this species has become a tradition, a chance to get out into the spring air again for the first time, listen to the red-winged blackbirds, and have a blast filling our coolers and our smokers with fish.

I encourage you to try sucker fishing this spring. You’ll quickly see there is no shame in catching and eating these great fish, which don’t deserve being thoughtlessly thrown on the bank to die. Instead, they should be respected as the great fish and natural resource that they are.

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