



Staying Alive

Modern cooling systems help keep fish in the well alive all day

During the late-1970's, B.A.S.S. founder Ray Scott recognized the importance and value of being able to release the fish caught in his tournaments back into the waters where they were caught. This was paramount in the future of the fisheries as well as the future of tournament angling. Scott knew that for his organization to flourish, conservation of the waterways and the fisheries was imperative. To achieve this goal, a system would have to be developed to care for the fish until it could be weighed and released.

This system would be called a livewell.

The development of the livewell allowed anglers to store their fish in a tank inside the hull of the boat. A bilge system driven by a switch on the boat would pump fresh water from the lake into the tank. The water filled from the surface causing a disturbance that served as an aeration system and provided a steady supply of air to the water. This helped to maintain proper oxygen levels for the fish.

Soon tournament organizations introduced stiff penalties to anglers for weighing in deceased fish. Not only did it show the public that the tournament organizations were committed to maintaining a healthy fishery, but it also served as a reminder to the anglers of the importance of maintaining a healthy catch. With thousands of dollars on the line, anglers could no longer afford to bring lifeless fish to the scales if it were at all possible.

During the last 30 years, boat manufacturers like Skeeter have invested unprecedented amounts of cash in the development of their livewell systems. Anglers and tournament organizations realized that there was much room for improvement in the livewell systems that supported their prized resource. Scientists found that even the size, shape and color of the tank where fish were held could impact the survival of the fish not only during the tournament, but after the fish were released as well. Livewell timers were soon added so an angler would not have to run the livewell continuously risking the loss of battery power. Timers also prevented the possibility of an angler forgetting to aerate their tank full of fish.

Other features soon entered the market such as recirculation pumps. These pumps would provide even further aeration to the water in addition to the pumps that filled the tank. With the advancements that have been made in handling procedures, and livewell technology, it is no surprise that live release rates in tournaments are at an all-time high. Even so, there are times during the year when the fish are very susceptible to the stresses of being caught and held in captivity. Usually this occurs when lake water temperatures begin to exceed 75 degrees. At this point, most of the bass have completed the spawn and they are slightly weaker from the previous month's affairs. As a result, they are more susceptible to the stresses of being caught and held in a tank, even if proper aeration is supplied.

Usually during late May and on into the summer, daytime highs can exceed 90 degrees. The hot sun belting down on a livewell lid can increase the temperature in the tank to lethal levels. The most natural remedy for this problem has been to add ice periodically to the tank to keep the livewell temperature at a safer level. But, it's very easy to add too much, too little or forget altogether. The recirculation pumps play an important role in main-

taining cooler temps in the well. Without being able to re-circulate the water, an angler would have to use 3-4 times as much ice to keep the water cool enough. It also requires the angler to balance the amount of fresh water being added to reduce ammonia build up, while they try to maintain the cooler water in the well. Chemical additives can aid in minimizing the stress on the fish by lowering ammonia build-up and loss of valuable electrolytes. But, biologists agree that next to proper aeration, cool water is most essential to keeping fish healthy while in captivity.

This brings me to a new product that has just hit the market that may revolutionize the way anglers handle their fish during warmer months. It's called Kool Well. Kool Well was conceived by a group of efficiency experts from Tennessee called The Links Group. Kool Well CEO, Paul Sorey says, "There's no debate about the positive effects of cool water when keeping fish alive." The Kool Well system offers a thermostat-controlled cooling system that maintains a selected temperature in the livewell. This means an angler can set the livewell thermostat to a desired temperature and the system will maintain it. As a tournament angler, I'm excited to see a product like this enter the market because I will no longer have to worry about the balancing act of adding ice every hour to maintain a safe temperature in my livewell. It also means the temperature will stay constant as opposed to fluctuating between hot and cold as I add ice and then warmer lake water. The Kool Well system will do it all for me.

"It's a conservation product," Sorey says. "It conserves the fish, conserves the sport of tournament fishing and it conserves a tournament angler's winnings." In addition, the Kool Well offers a "redundant aeration system." Not only do the fish receive aeration from the livewell pumps installed by the boat manufacturer, but the Kool Well provides an additional aeration system. If the boat's aeration system fails, the Kool Well system will continue running, ensuring that an angler's catch is not lost. I personally have lost thousands of dollars in tournaments over the past few years because of fish care penalties, despite the great efforts I have taken to keep the fish alive. The Kool Well could all but eliminate these worries because I know that regardless of how harsh the conditions may be, I will be taking the proper measures to eliminate the possibilities of losing the prized resource that I enjoy pursuing so much.

Although the Kool Well system was developed with tournament anglers in mind, it could serve as a great product for live bait fishermen as well. Through years of fishing for striped bass at Lake Martin with live shad, I learned that healthy bait meant more fish to be caught. Keeping the water cool in the baitwell was the most important factor in keeping the shad lively so they could be gobbled up by a monster stripe. Whether you just want to keep your fish alive long enough for a picture or your career depends on the maintenance of a healthy fishery, a proper livewell system is no longer an option.

It's a necessity.

Greg Vinson is professional angler from Wetumpka, Ala., who grew up on Lake Martin. He is a rookie on the Bassmaster Elite Series. Greg recently finished in the top 12 at the Diamond Drive on Lake Dardanelle, Ark..



BIG CATCHES

BY GREG VINSON