How to Go Kite Fishing: in Micronesia and the U.S.

Kite Safety in the Headlines

Guatemala's Soul-Lifting Kites

Giving Kite Reels a Whirl
Volume 1, Number 3, Fall 1977

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Cover

Patricio Tahemamacho makes kites in preparation for kite fishing on
the small Pacific island of Palau. It is here recently that an environmental
controversy has centered. A giant oil supertanker port has been
proposed for this remote isle in the Micronesia chain. The proposal has
accelerated the desires of the natives for independence from U.S. trust
protection, and has created a classic confrontation between conservation and
development. Wayne Baldwin, President of the Hawaii chapter of AKA,
was in the right place at the right time to see Patricio working in the
traditional manner of his ancestors. Except for the striped shorts, the
picture could have been taken generations ago. "It was like striking gold
to me," Wayne confessed. Photograph by Wayne J. Baldwin.
(Story on page 32.)
Story and Photographs
By Wayne J. Baldwin

Patricio Tahemaremacho's fingers deftly interlaced the dry slender ribs of a coconut frond through the flattened breadfruit leaf. I felt as if I were visiting Tobi Island before the days Europeans navigated this exotic and unknown part of the tropical Pacific Ocean.

Patricio was making a breadfruit leaf fishing kite of the type used for centuries to catch needlefish from a canoe along the shores of this small, remote island several hundred miles north of New Guinea.

No one really seems to know exactly how long ago Patricio's ancestors patiently worked on similar kites. There is good reason to believe this unique kite, similar to the one shown in the photographs, was made here for centuries from the natural materials at hand: carefully prepared breadfruit leaves, slender ribs removed from the fronds of a coconut palm, and strong sennet line made by twisting together the tough individual fibers from dried coconut husks. The fibers were used to tie the slender ribs together where they crisscross to give added strength.

It's an exciting feeling to view with your own eyes an ancient type of fishing kite being constructed by an island craftsman approaching eighty years of age. Patricio was instructed in the art of making these kites and catching needlefish by his father and grandfather when he was a young boy. He continues to make these kites as he was taught, even though younger fishermen now use plastic materials or purchase commercially made kites.

As interesting as the kite is the peculiar lure used to capture needlefish, a tasty fish that sometimes reaches a length of six feet or more when fully grown. This unusual lure is made from the web of a species of spider found on Tobi Island. Usually six or more spider webs are carefully collected on a slender Y shaped stick, then tied together in several places. The finished lure, resembling a frayed, elongated noose two to three inches in length, is slipped off the Y shaped collecting stick and tied onto the end of the sennet fishing line.

One can close one's eyes and imagine the joy that some long-forgotten Tobi islander felt upon returning to his village with a successful catch of fish captured using his new discovery—a discovery that was to help feed generations of islanders in future years. The spider web lure is particularly effective for catching needlefish, since they have long jaws with large, recurved teeth that easily become firmly entangled in the fine silken strands.

I first met Patricio Tahemaremacho in Koror, Palau, while there on business in late 1976, and through a mutual friend made arrangements to purchase two breadfruit leaf fishing kites. I also hoped to take a series of photographs of their construction. Luckily, I was able to accomplish both, while observing every detail of construction.

The two finished kites were a real bargain: they cost me a new pocketknife and $10. Although Patricio did not not speak English, his son Patris, who is equally adept at making these kites, acted as translator and explained exactly how the breadfruit leaf, obtained from Tobi Island, was dried and pressed between two woven mats, the slender ribs were removed from the coconut frond, and the coconut husk fibers were prepared. I watched in admiration as Patricio began making the kite totally by eye, without the aid of a ruler or layout. It took two hours to finish one kite, but this did not include the time required beforehand in preparation of the breadfruit leaf, removing and trimming by hand the slender ribs from coconut fronds, patiently twisting together the sennet fishing line, and making the spider web lure.

Fishing is usually done by a single
fisherman from a canoe, but it can also be accomplished while wading along the edge of the coral reefs if the prevailing winds are suitable. According to Patris, a good fisherman can often catch up to twenty or thirty needlefish within several hours.

During fishing the breadfruit leaf kite is flown at different heights depending upon the strength of the wind. In light winds they are flown as low as sixty feet above the water but in strong winds they may be flown as high as three hundred feet. Both light-wind and strong-wind kites are made that have a short adjustable bridle for setting the angle of attack. They can also be made to fly to the left or to the right by trimming or altering the kite on one side. These techniques are quite simple but very effective.

In launching the kite from a canoe, the fishing line, which also acts as the kite's tail, is let out first, followed by letting out the sennet kite line to keep the kite aloft while closely observing its behavior. Since the breadfruit leaf will in time become worn or damaged, frequent bridle adjustments are necessary. After letting out the flying line it is either tied onto the canoe or held between the fisherman's teeth, thus allowing him to handle his canoe and line at the same time. The canoe slowly follows the kite while the spider web lure is made to skip and dance along the surface of the water. Apparently the lure resembles a small fish jumping or frantically trying to elude some pursuing predator. This action entices the fast-swimming needlefish to strike the lure. When it does, its large, numerous teeth become securely entangled in the strong spider web filaments. Then the kite with the needlefish firmly "hooked" by the lure is pulled in and the fish removed. The kite is launched again within several minutes to catch another fish.

There is considerable speculation regarding why this method is so successful for capturing these large, timid predators. Modern rod and reel methods are often used with success but their effectiveness does not approach that of the ancient breadfruit leaf kite and spider web lure. Some observers believe that fishing with a kite allowed the fishermen to maneuver the lure close to their timid prey without startling it. Some are convinced that it's strictly the motion of the lure playing upon the surface of the water. Others believe that the fishing kites tended to attract needlefish to the lure because the moving kite looked like some seabird feeding upon small fishes.

Unfortunately, lack of free time prevented me from going fishing with Patricio in his canoe. The centuries-old techniques he used were described to me in considerable detail by Patris, and they closely agree with observations made by other individuals and with reports printed in scientific journals. However, good fortune placed several clear 35mm color slides in my hands that showed Patricio actually fishing with one of his kites in the Western Caroline Islands. These excellent photographs were kindly made available to me by Dr. Bob Johannes, an associate also interested in kite fishing and fishing lore of the Pacific islanders.

Since these rare and valuable fishing kites may become quite brittle with age or damaged from frequent handling, I donated both, along with the photographs, to the Bernice P. Bishop Museum in Honolulu, HI, so that in the years to come others may enjoy and perhaps study them.