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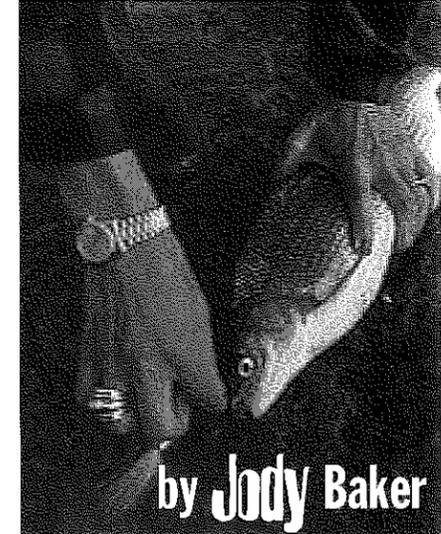
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Women & Fish: WTN'S



by Jody Baker

"The Natural Angler"

"Finally in the Net after a Long Battle!"

Here is an image of fishing at its most essential: landscape, man, fish. This postcard depicts the male angler alone in the wilderness, apart from civilization. Or rather, he is alone with the fish with whom he is engaged in an intimate relationship; the caption, "Finally in the Net after a Long Battle!" constructs a sense of bonding, as if the two were on equal footing, partners for a moment in the eternal struggles of nature. Here is the moment of truth, where a man encounters nature directly, an experience apparently unmediated by the complexities of social life in modern times.



"Fresh Fish Fry"

Another postcard, "Fresh Fish Fry," shows us a slightly more developed social world, a father and his son about to bond over a pan of fresh fish. The pair have set up camp in a vast, empty landscape. And yet it is a generous landscape, a natural utopia of abundance. Here, so it seems, one can live "off the fat of the land" and pull fish from the water with a minimum of effort. Survival is represented as an uncomplicated affair; without wage labour or exchange, sustenance is taken directly and immediately from nature.





"A Perfect Camp-Site"

Finally, there is the all male group of "A Perfect Camp-Site" (next page). Their (and our) attention is focussed on the display of the catch; the "trophy shot" is perhaps the most common image of fishing. Our gaze is also directed to the boy as the men—and we—partake of his pleasure. He is of central importance as the postcard speaks of the didactic function of fishing. A boy learns about nature and his proper relation to it. At the same time he learns what it means to be a masculine subject—he learns to be a man among men.

These three postcards, harvested recently from a motel in New Brunswick, appear to be generic photos with the suitable location simply stamped on the back. Their function is twofold: they operate as tourism advertisements, that in X location one can obtain such experiences; and they express, define, and validate the experiences of the angler who collects or sends the card. The men who are in

the images are not necessarily the main subject; rather, these cards are just as much about the landscape that surrounds them. These images of landscape express a nostalgia for a preindustrial past of natural abundance and simplicity of lifestyle, a world supposedly removed from (modern) society. But if these cards contain nostalgia, they lack history. They lack history because they lack specificity; they represent a *generic* pastoralism. Obviously, all three cards present a social world—namely, the culture of the outdoorsman, camper, fisher—but angling is represented here as an escape from modern, urban or suburban social pressures and obligations. We are drawn into a world of fishing that is represented as natural and authentic. In a strange—but not uncommon—inversion, what the camera records or signifies is the absence of culture, history, and thus the camera's *own* absence.

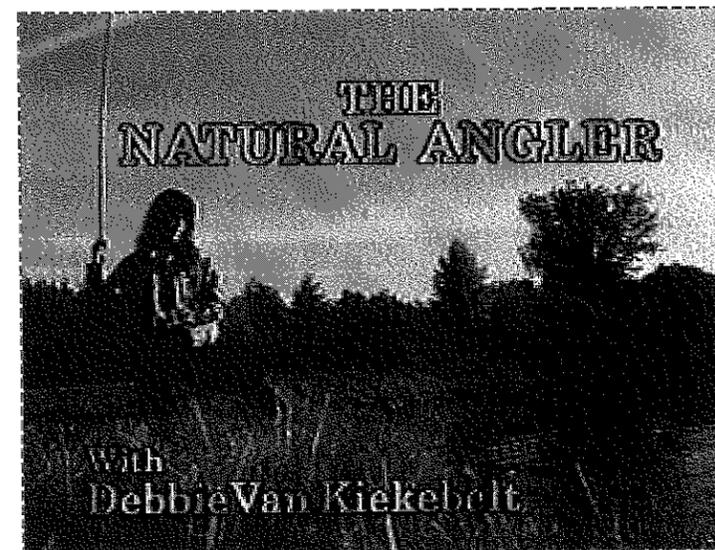
Of course, to be *represented* as "natural" is a contradiction in terms; these cards are themselves codes. The postcards' hyperreal colours belie their constructedness. The fishers depicted are far "off the beaten track," but it takes a good deal of culture—of dress, objects, gesture, and a little added colour—to signify the natural. We can see in these images that fishing requires a great deal of cultural baggage. The fisher's world is one of a vast array of equipment, dress codes, hierarchies of practices, elaborate moral and ethical rules, as well as often complex government regulations. Behind the seemingly trivial kitsch of these postcards lies a social world composed of several layers of meaning that resonate within complex—and often contradictory—interrelations: nature and culture; individual and community; the exploitation and conservation of nonhuman life; an ethic of respect for both the land and one's fellow sportsman; and particularly the cultural roles of gender.

Fishing from the Nature/Culture Divide:

"The Natural Angler" and the televisual construction of nature

The aforementioned issues are the basic components of sport-fishing in general, and they form the symbolic substance of the full spectrum of fishing shows on television. From the popular to the obscure, the local to the national, the ordinary to the slick ("Fishing the West," "Hank Parker's Outdoor Magazine," "Fishin' with Orlando Wilson," "Fishing with Roland Martin," "Rod and Reel Streamside," "The Walkers Cay Chronicles," "Great American Outdoors," "Fishin' Canada," "Celebrity Fishing," "Bass Masters"), the production of knowledge on fishing shows goes far beyond technical know-how; it reproduces fishing culture. But "The Natural Angler," the Women's Television Network's recent feminine incursion into the male domain of the fishing genre, exposes the tensions and contradictions of fishing culture.

"The Natural Angler," which used to be hosted by Debbie Van Kiekebelt, emerges from a fairly well-established tradition. Fishing shows have become a notable feature of low-budget cable networks—TNN, ESPN2, TLC, WTN—and have long established their place in the weekend ghetto of banality. As a hybrid of those other low-budget weekend staples, nature documentaries and marginal sports contests, fishing shows take us to the fringes, to the peaceful hinterland of the television medium. But from their



marginal cultural position fishing shows speak to matters of no small importance to contemporary audiences. These shows, "The Natural Angler" included, are about much more than the fish and their capture; they also establish relations between the fisher's world and that of the fishes, people and their "natural" environment—culture and nature. It is, in fact, this nature/culture dichotomy that serves as the foundation for the production of knowledge on fishing shows; the other issues they raise, such as ethics and gender, are layered on top of this dualism.

Nearly every shot of the fishing show expresses a negotiation between nature and culture. The overwhelming majority of fishing shows are shot from the confined space of the fishing boat from which the hosts and guests fish. Typically, it is the boat from which we look out upon or across the surface of the water. So the division between nature and culture is expressed as that between inside and outside and we are asked to have a seat on the inside. On the inside is a close, confined and somewhat contained world, a masculine world of camaraderie, a world of jokes, slights or congratulations, and the production and exchange of knowledge and fishing morality. The social world of the boat is most often contained on-screen and the waterscape—or nature—lies just off-screen, on the edges of the narrative. The meanings of the social place and natural space are distinct but codetermining; they resonate off one another, and each provides a context for the other. The fishing show thus represents and fixes, despite the mobility of the boat, a social *place* that floats upon the surface of a natural *space*.

When the full oeuvre of "The Natural Angler" is viewed against the backdrop of its genre, what is most extraordinary is that Van Kiekebelt *never* fishes from a boat. One reason for this is certainly budgetary. Like the rest of WTN's fare, the show is low-budget and down-to-earth. But a boat and the closed world it represents would be out of sync with the overall tone of the show. Although "The Natural Angler" draws upon the conventions of the genre and falls well within its parameters, it tries to offer a unique, "feminine" perspective on fishing. It carries a different emphasis; for example, it does not emphasize technique so much as the ethics of fishing or safety; it places fishing as a cultural activity in a larger social context. Van Kiekebelt addresses the viewer directly throughout an entire show; direct address is a rarity in mainstream, masculine shows where the exchange of lore and expertise between on-screen anglers is the norm. She tends to eschew gadgetry in favor of edification, often breaking from fishing to visit a local cultural point of interest such as the Crawford Lake Indian Village Site, fishing resorts, clubs, or bed and breakfast inns:

When I go fishing I like to make the most of my fishing trip and I like to cruise the area, discover some unique, hidden places that make that particular fishing area special.

Or she may stop to lecture on the function of boat locks, fish farms, native fishing practices, the choice of proper clothing, fishing with children, and so on. The didactic function of this programme is often tied to a particular effort to bestow upon the viewer an appreciation of nature—thus the title of the show. As she looks across a mountain vista she expounds:

Absolutely breath-taking. As you can see I've traded in my fishing vest and my hip-waders for hiking boots. I want to make the most of my experience. There's a lot more to fly-fishing on the river than just fishing. As you can see from this vantage point: the lush habitat; the farmland; the wildlife to appreciate in this particular area is the white-tailed deer; there's the beaver, of course; and because of the drop in elevation here I'm told there's turkey vultures around, but I haven't seen anything. So when you go out for a day fishing, get up early, enjoy yourself, catch those fish while they're biting. But then go out and really make the most of your day. Whichever area you choose, relax and enjoy yourself; whether you are with friends or family, come out and enjoy the beauty around you, and appreciate and conserve it.

What is significant here is the relationship between natural and cultural experiences. For Debbie and her viewers, fishing, although practised in natural surroundings, is in essence a cultural experience. Her hiking boots give her the agility to move back and forth across the divide between nature and culture.

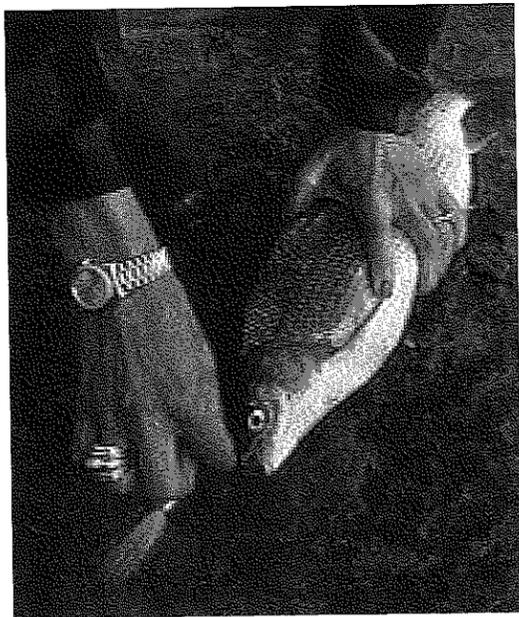
Other fishing shows tend to efface the construction of nature and maintain a rigid distinction between what is considered social and what must remain natural. While fishing arctic char in the hinterlands of Alaska, the host of "Great American Outdoors" instructs his viewers on how to maintain this distinction:

For goodness sakes, when you have those tag ends left, roll them up and put 'em in your pocket. Don't you just hate to go fishing somewhere around the pond or creek and see some monofilament line or some evidence that someone was there before? I mean, this is beautiful country and the next guy that's here fishin', I don't want him to see any evidence that I was here, and likewise I don't want to find any, so keep your tag ends in your pocket.

And if the manufacturing of nature is revealed it is done with ambivalence. For example, the host of "Rod and Reel Streamside" tells us,

These fish didn't just materialize up here because it's Canada or because it's the wilds. They were actually stocked in this area and there has been a lot of effort, ever since the early 1900s, to preserve this area and to maintain this fish population. It fascinated me that so much effort had gone into creating this wonderful fishery.

The fascination seems to be aimed at more than simply the amount of time, labour, and capital expended to create this "wonderful fishery"; he seems genuinely concerned and uncomfortable with this confrontation between social production and a particular notion of nature as (Canadian) wilderness. Van Kiekebelt, on the other hand, seems untroubled by such paradigmatic breakdowns and if anything she encourages them. She fishes below hydro dams, in obviously constructed ponds and from docks and concrete embankments. Most of her shows have her angling in the constructed landscapes of fishing clubs and resorts and she often interrogates their owners or employees about their hatcheries and the practice of stocking fish. What is perhaps most startling—and wonderful—about "The Natural Angler" is that Van Kiekebelt, a strikingly beautiful woman by traditional standards, wears the full complement of ornamentation while fishing: lipstick, eye shadow, several rings, oversized earrings, bracelets, etc. To see her wearing bright red nail polish, with several rings, a gold watch and half a dozen bracelets while fishing is to witness a radical departure from fishing's traditional rugged masculinity.



Fishing Was Invented by a Woman: the Domestication of Nature

Young guest: *Could you tell me who invented fishing?*

Van Kiekebelt: *I'm sure it was a woman, Jake.*

"The Natural Angler" can locate itself on the frontier between the natural and the cultural because it is about the domestication, not the conquest, of nature. When all of nature becomes domesticated, there is little need for any distinctions between nature and culture. At the same time, the show represents the domestication and feminization of a masculinist genre. With just a touch of feminist irony, Van Kiekebelt asks her guest and long-time fisher Donna Salmon about the feminization of the sport:

Van Kiekebelt: *Now do you find a lot of women fishing?*

D. Salmon: *I'm finding it's improving.*

Van Kiekebelt: *Do you and your girlfriends go out for a beer and say, "Let's go fishing this weekend?"*

D. Salmon: *Well, that's stretching it a little. I wish there were a lot more women out there to join me with this. And I find that slowly but surely women are picking it up a bit more often.*

Thus, "The Natural Angler"'s attempt to confound the distinctions between nature and culture is linked to an agitation of gender roles; it is significant that "The Natural Angler" is scheduled just before "Car Care with Mary Bellows." But if this foray into the male domain of fishing is a feminization of the genre, it is rarely, if ever, feminist. As her female child guest squats over a minnow bucket, Van Kiekebelt teaches her what it means to be a woman among men:

Van Kiekebelt: *Now Whitney, I'm going to tell you a secret. Your brother wouldn't touch one of these [minnows]. Now what kind of guy is he? Shall we show him what a real woman is? Do you want to put your hand in there?*

But to be a woman angler means to bring traditional female roles to the sport. If "The Natural Angler" posits fishing as a cultural, rather than natural, activity, for women anglers it is a culture of domesticity. It is linked to the culinary arts:

Van Kiekebelt: *I love to barbecue whitefish. It is so tender; it is so nice. . . . A little bit of garlic, a bit of butter; Mmmm, I can taste it already.*

Or, in a discussion with Donna Salmon, fishing becomes craft, rather than sport:

Van Kiekebelt: *What do you think about fly-fishing. You just got into it recently?*

D. Salmon: *Well, I really enjoy fly-fishing and it seems to be that there is less technology involved; it's more you and the fish. You've got only the line between you and the fish and there is a bit more skill involved than. . .*

Van Kiekebelt: *I think there is a real art to it.*

D. Salmon: *Oh, yeah. And when you get into the other aspects: the education, the fly tying, which is a beautiful, beautiful craft. . . it's crafty! It's great for women to do. There's such neat flies out there. There's a whole new realm when it comes to fly-fishing.*

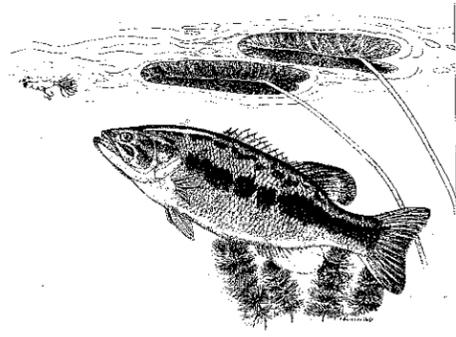
Van Kiekebelt: *You know a lot of people say fly-fishing for a woman . . . almost go hand in hand [sic]. There's a real touch, there's a real art and it's a very sensitive style of fishing.*

The "female instinct" for fly-fishing comes from women's sensitive nature, and that means a woman should take her nurturing abilities with her when she goes fishing:

Van Kiekebelt: *[I have] what I call my emergency measures, or my care package. You know, kids get restless, and sometimes they get hungry and you want to make sure that they're happy the whole time they are out there. So I always have a couple granola bars, a couple lollipops, something neat, easy, that I can put in my pocket.*

Of course, like the rest of television, this programme is produced to deliver appropriately socialized consumers to advertisers. "The Natural Angler" is sponsored by Ford, Hi-Tec Sporting Goods, The Kettle Creek Clothing Co., and two tackle manufacturers, Berkley and Fenwick. The show's audience is also packaged and sold to a wide range of advertisers: those selling fishing equipment, of course (although big-ticket items like boats and fish finders are notably absent), but also producers of what are considered feminine items which are often pitched with particularly regressive representations of female consumers: Secret anti-perspirant; SugarTwin; face, hair, and body care products; domestic soap products; and an array of food products (all noticeably absent from male fishing shows).

The nature/culture, outside/inside, male/female dichotomies that are negotiated on-screen in "The Natural Angler" actually parallel similar dichotomies that have emerged historically in the larger field of television and its place in everyday life. Since its development in the 1950s television has offered a closer relation between the indoors and the outdoors; television is a means to master the outdoors and nature and carry it into the domestic interior. Along with the development of suburbs, TV was designed for spatial domestication. Fishing shows, "The Natural Angler" in particular, are clearly the fulfillment of such a function in their ability to bring the fish into the living room while offering an experience of nature which is safe from any dangerous ambiguities and excesses of meaning, meaning which might threaten the carefully constructed world of postwar North America. The construction of nature on television goes hand in hand with its construction in our homes and yards, in suburban design and development, along our highways, in parks and preserves, and so on. "The Natural Angler" participates in the historical processes of containment, domestication, and rationalization of social and natural life.



Althusser Goes Fishing

The smallmouth will slip up behind it, and hail it quickly.
"Rod and Reel Streamside"

Fishing is the art of hailing, of bringing the fish *into the social world of the angler*. The lure is addressed not just to any fish but a specific species or a specific fish in a specific place: "Hey you there! Hey you, Bass!" As Van Kiekebelt suggests, hailing can work in both directions:

Van Kiekebelt: *They [the salmon] are just beckoning for me to come and catch them.*

The surface of the water is ever-present on the screen of the fishing show. It is a membrane that separates two worlds: the water-world and the air-world. These different worlds are defined not just by the concrete, material elements of which they are composed, they are also different subjective worlds: the fish-world and the human-world. The fishing line negotiates between person and fish and their worlds:

Van Kiekebelt: *What appeals to you about fishing . . . what attracts you to the sport?*

D. Salmon: *I think the relaxation and the adrenaline that you get every time you catch a fish. . . . As well as the enjoyment, especially with catch and release, to be able to catch a wild animal, to appreciate playing with them, and allowing them to go back to nature and live again is really thrilling to me and I really enjoy that part of it.*

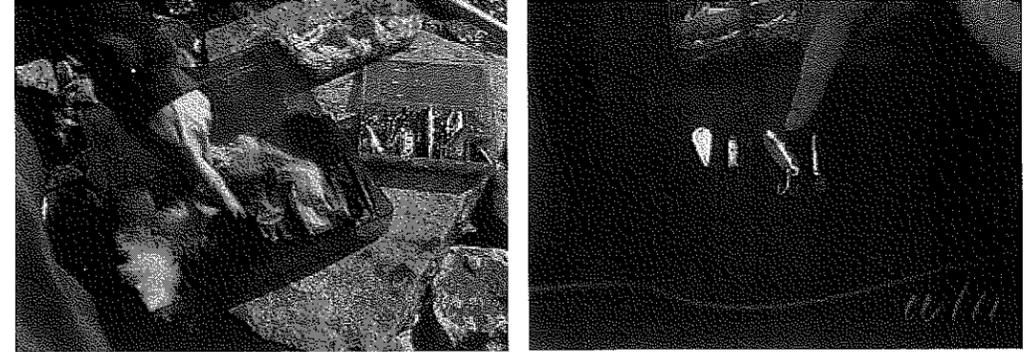
The orgasmic moment—the "money shot" of this genre—occurs when the membrane is violently ruptured and the fish, by its own effort or by that of the fisher, violently enters the air-world. On "The Natural Angler", like other shows, a jumping fish will elicit cries of joy from the anglers, and the higher and more violent the jump, the more respect is extended to the fish. This rupture can signify violent death for the fish, but it is also a face-to-face meeting of fish and fisher, nature and culture after a sometimes prolonged foreplay of communication between the two through the fishing line:

Van Kiekebelt: *There's nothing like that feeling of casting and that hook set; like knowing that you've beaten the fish and outwitted them. And then putting up the fight and bringing them in. There's a real bond between the fish and the angler.*

It is significant, too, that the TV angler often speaks *to*, as well as about, the fish,

Van Kiekebelt: *I am definitely going to eat him for supper tonight. [To the fish] I'm sorry, don't hate me.*

This boundary between the fish world and the human world is crossed discursively: *that is the primary function of the fishing show*. In a couple of episodes of "The Natural Angler" we are shown underwater shots of the fish. These shots are found in abundance in the print advertisements for lures and jigs and often show the fish taking or about to take the lure. We are placed within the fish's subjective world; we are asked to see the practice of fishing from, quite literally, the fish's point of view. The central problem of lure choice and manipulation is to discover or predict what will be recognized by a particular species of fish, in a particular environment at a particular time, as an attractive meal. (Van Kiekebelt demonstrates a precise and detailed knowledge of lure function in relation to fish behaviour and environmental conditions.) A great deal of effort is expended attempting to come to terms with the other-world of the fish, so what distinguishes the skill of the fisher is not only skill in casting or handling a hooked fish, but also her familiarity with fish perception and interspecies interpretive and communicative abilities.



At first glance, the cultural practice of fishing seems to be primarily a leisure activity, a sport that offers a set of pleasures in the pursuit of game and the domination of nature. Without the justification of subsistence, fishing might seem a *pure* sport, nothing but a game played out at the expense of the fish. But "The Natural Angler" foregrounds what is only a subtext in most fishing shows: a reciprocity between the human and nonhuman, fisher and fish. That reciprocity is perhaps nowhere better exemplified than in the practice of catching and releasing fishing. Catch and release is exhorted on nearly every fishing show, but "The Natural Angler" is particularly obsessed with the practice. Releasing the fish back into the water has become nearly as important symbolically as the catch; on "The Natural Angler" there is almost as much instruction on proper release methods as on those of capture.

Van Kiekebelt: *Oh, jeez, this guy is tough. Come on, come on. O.K. Come to Mama [laughs]. Come to Mama. All right. O.K. I'm going to pull him in now. Here we go. [As she picks up the struggling trout] Oh! Oh! Hang on; hang on; hang on! O.K. I'm going to grab him just in front of his fins, hold him there [holds the fish under the water. I'm giving him oxygen. Oh, he's a beauty. He is gorgeous. Of course I used a barbless hook because we really want to release him. Hang on; hang on; hang on! O.K., let me go for my hemostats here because I am having trouble getting this hook out of his mouth. Hang on, buddy. There we go; there we go; got it out. Always remember when you release him, put him back in the water, let him get a little oxygen, let him recover, take it easy until you feel—oh, he's a strong one [as fish swims away] and release. . . . Oh, that's great . . . away he goes back to his natural habitat.*

While it makes little sense in terms of fishing as a means to harvest resources, this elaborate ritual makes perfect sense within a cultural practice that attempts to generate a symbolic exchange with the environment.

This fishing show suggests a relation to fish based not only on representation, but also on communication and symbolic exchange. The literal and figurative understanding of the fish-as-subject has important consequences for fishing as a *cultural* practice. As I have suggested, fishing is much more than a leisure activity; it is primarily an ideological practice laden with ethical and ultimately ecological significance. Although a cursory glance at the fishing show would suggest an ethic of exploitation and domination, "The Natural Angler" reveals something quite different: interspecies communication and discursive reciprocity. The show's disruption of the symbolic boundaries between nature and culture points the way toward different relationships to nature.

"The Natural Angler" may offer an ecological ethic based upon a somewhat radical reformulation of human and nonhuman relations. Because it does so in the context of the feminization of sport-fishing, it begs the question that lies at the centre of ecofeminist debates: Are women, because of their biological roles as mothers and social roles as caregivers, somehow closer to nature and more "in tune" with ecology, or does the domestication and feminization of nature simply function to naturalize subordinate social roles, leaving women outside politics and outside history? WTN's contribution to fishing culture brings us no closer to resolving this question and only muddies the water further. This is because the show hangs in a web of tension and contradiction between its ethical, didactic impetus and the economic function of commercial television. The show's apparent ecological concerns are tempered by television's role as an advertising medium and a means of socialization. If feminized fishing sets up symbolic exchanges between women and fish it also sets up exchanges between commodities. If the show disturbs the gendered division of consumption of television, it also reinforces traditional gender roles in order to sell "feminine" products. So although "The Natural Angler" exists in one of the most obscure and remote corners of the mediascape, it nonetheless engages some of the broader and more significant issues, contradictions and practices of contemporary western culture.

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