

Anglers may soon be ice fishing their own weed bed

Artificial fronds could become next craze

By JIM LEE
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MOSINEE — Along with portable fishing shanties, ice anglers may be toting a different sort of temporary shelter to Wisconsin lakes this winter ... a portable weed bed.

It's a seemingly far-fetched idea that could take if a central Wisconsin entrepreneur has his way.

"This is the only thing out there that attracts fish to where you can catch them," says Mosinee's Mike Laqua, 41, one of three owners of Ladredge Outdoors (www.reelweeds.com), a company that is just beginning to grow its underwater line of artificial weeds.

For about \$18, an angler can purchase a single plastic-type weed that resembles a natural "cabbage" weed with 4-6-inch leaves. A 5-strand "weed bed" costs about \$70.

Laqua and his partners, John Eldredge of Wausau and Chuck Eldredge of Elk River, Minn., developed the idea while ice fishing on a lake in their home state of South Dakota.

"We were all in different areas trying

to find fish when I finally lucked into some perch. The guys came over with their underwater cameras and found I was fishing near a single scraggly weed. It was the only cover around and the fish were concentrated around it."

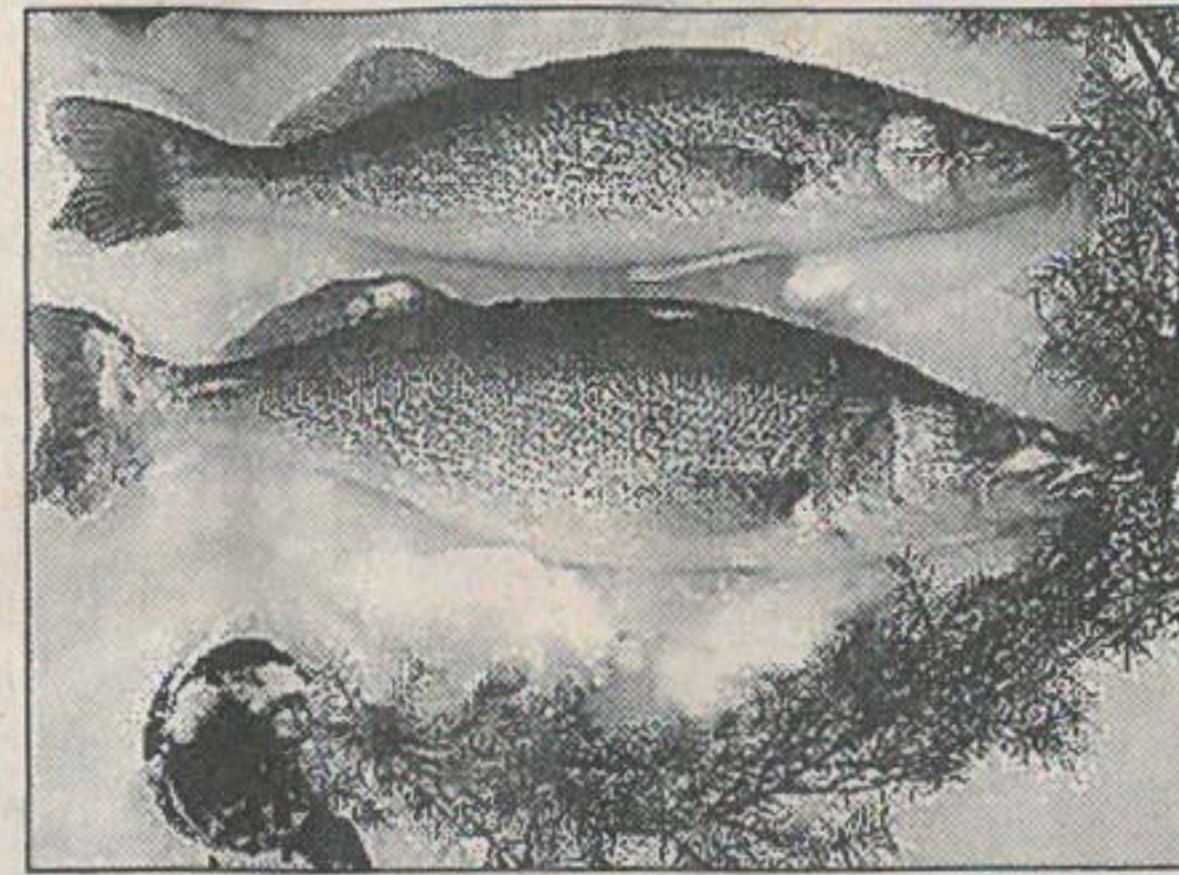
That discovery, along with several years of testing, resulted in development of a fake weed that stands green and 4-foot tall in the water. It is constructed to withstand the freezing and thawing rigors of ice fishing.

A weight at the bottom of the bendable, flexible stem keeps it on the bottom. A line attached to the top is linked to a bobber at the surface, which keeps the weed upright. A floating cord wrap contains 40-feet of line for lowering the weed to a wide range of fishing depths. The whole device weighs less than 8 ounces, according to Laqua.

Anglers can set out a single weed, a line of five weeds set two feet apart, a circle of weeds around an ice fishing shanty or any configuration that meets their needs.

"It's kind of like decoys in duck hunting," Laqua said. "Fish are attracted to where you are."

"Of course, if there are no fish around, you're not going to be luring any. You have to be judicious in where you set up. If you're fishing a breakline or hump, fish will naturally seek out those areas more



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

An artificial weed — dubbed "Structure on a String" — has been developed by a company with central Wisconsin connections. The product is aimed at ice fishing and open water anglers.

and you'll have better results."

Anglers typically fish about two feet to the side of a weed to prevent entanglement.

It takes a few minutes to drill a hole and set up an individual weed, a process that so-called "run and gun" anglers - those who prefer to spend little unproductive time in one spot and keep moving until fish are found - can find onerous.

"It's the guys who set up shop for a couple hours who will use our weeds," Laqua said.

"The technique works best if you fish

flats or bowl-shaped lakes without much structure. Fish are moving around looking for forage and will spot the weeds and come to them.

"It's also great for people who fish walleyes near dropoffs where the fish tend to move in toward evening. The weeds will often attract walleyes and hold them in the area."

Artificial weeds must be removed daily in Wisconsin when an angler is through fishing, Laqua noted.

"Every state is a little different when it comes to regulations," he said. "But in most of the Midwest, you can't put a permanent fish crib down without a permit."

Laqua, a pediatric eye technician, said the entire marketing venture "has been a learning experience" for the trio. John Eldredge is an 8th grade parochial school teacher while Chuck Eldredge is an insurance executive.

"We're selling only through retail outlets," Laqua said. "We concentrated on Minnesota last year because it is a major ice fishing market. This year, we hope to be in Wisconsin stores. We only market through retail stores."

Summer anglers have found a use for the product, attaching the artificial weeds to marker buoys for evening walleye fishing with slip bobbers, Laqua said. Cottage owners have placed the fake weeds under

and near docks to improve fishing.

If approved by the Department of Natural Resources, lake associations may some day find artificial weeds a potential solution to replacing crayfish-ravaged natural weed growth and restoring fish spawning habitat.

"Private pond owners are calling us," Laqua said. "They may have a nuisance weed problem or can't grow weeds and they think artificial weeds may be an answer. Where there is a need like that, we sell our weeds in quantities of 50-100."

"I didn't see that coming ... but there's a lot of different uses that could catapult from this."

In the meantime, ice fishermen using the bogus greenery could be in for greater scrutiny.

"We've had wardens come up to us while we were testing the system," Laqua said.

"They'd see all the holes and the bobbers ... and figure we had too many lines out. One warden had his pen out, ready to write ... until we showed him what we were doing."

"Then he was really intrigued by it."

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