

# Catching & Keeping Live Baits

Introducing **Part TWO** of a special four part series all about live baits - finding, catching and storing them (either naturally or with the latest power infusion pumps) in this very special series by top scientist, fisherman and author, **Scott Bannerot**.

Report, Pics & illustrations by **Scott Bannerot**

## Natural Live Wells

Convinced that live bait is a must, but put off by fancy power live wells?

Properly designed, naturally-aspirated bait wells are simple, cost-effective, and capable of excellent performance.

By **Scott Bannerot**

Last month we talked about all kinds of ways to catch live bait, including some species that swim around actively and require significant oxygenation and water exchange.

Just the thought of how a load of fresh live bait can empower you on the fishing grounds may have seeded overnight dreams of wild, unprecedented success, dampened as you woke up in the morning and pondered the harsh realities of installing a major power live well over that first hot cup of coffee.

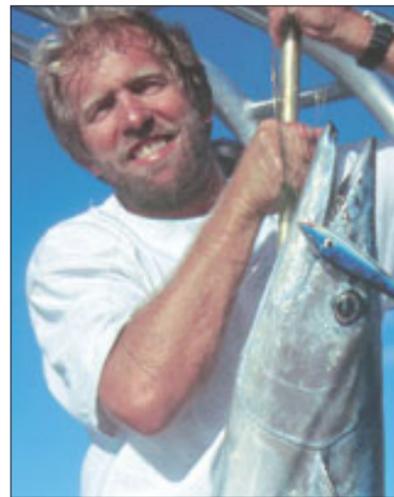
Take heart, mates, because some of the best live wells in the world require nothing in the way of electric pumps and complicated plumbing, only that your vessel is afloat in fresh seawater.

So before you whip out the wallet let's have a good look at what natural circulation can do for you.

Why suffer the hassle, expense, and electrical demand if something simpler will suit your purpose?

## Buckets and Cages

Perforated floating containers work



well for relatively hardy bait species when you are fishing from a dock or seawall, or when it's a short boat ride to the fishing spot.

Purpose-designed floating bait buckets come aboard when it's time to move or bait hooks, and otherwise stay tethered overboard.

The same philosophy, often expanded in the form of a plastic garbage can with a tight-fitting lid and lanyard, is excellent for keeping bait overnight at the dock. Pepper it with holes, and secure sections of children's float tubes with cable ties just below the lip and you have a large-capacity container suitable for most invertebrates and hardier baitfish, assuming the location has reasonable seawater exchange and flow. Drop in an air stone powered by a cheap A/C aquarium air pump and you'll sharply increase the amount of bait you can keep.

Intermediate in space consumption are cylindrical soft-mesh cages formed by a plastic hoop at the bottom and

top, with either a third hoop or drawstring arrangement for the lid. Hoop lids secure well with Velcro straps at several points around the perimeter.

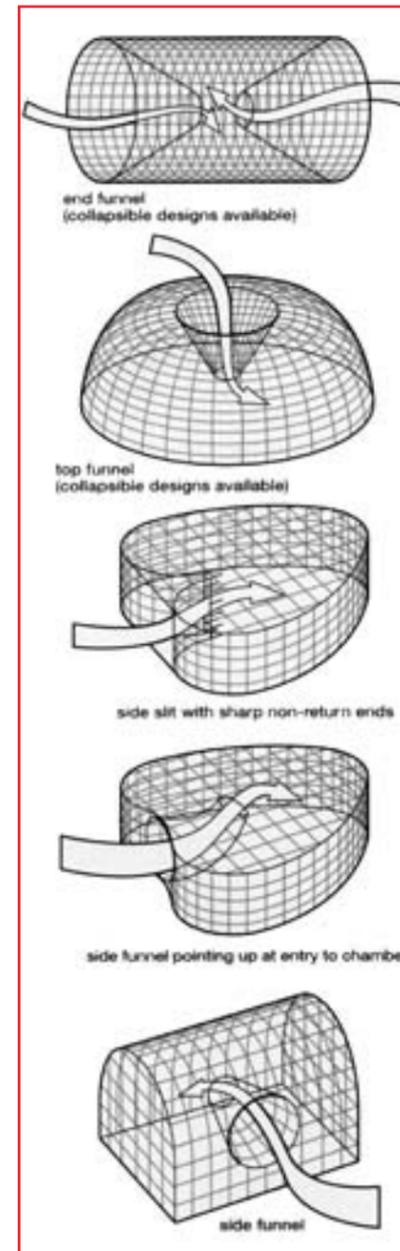
PVC frame rectangular soft-mesh cages are inexpensive to build and can provide much larger capacity than the commercial cylindrical cages on the market, but these are fixed rather than collapsible and so offer less compact storage. The problem with all of these soft-mesh cages is that crabs, filefish and triggerfish, pelicans and other seabirds, and a variety of other sea life can quickly render the cage worthless by creating openings in the mesh.

I recently spent \$85 on one and within a week everything from big tarpon to cormorants had made a mockery of it.

For this reason most professional captains go to the trouble of building, or purchasing where available, suitable oval or cylindrical hard-mesh cages with secure, hinged top-loading doors. These defeat the marauders but they are heavy and suitable only for bait storage at the dock, certainly not for taking aboard boats for fishing trips. A subset of these cages doubles as traps. One local design features green, plastic-coated metal mesh in a rectangular shape with a bait compartment in the middle and an entry slit in either end. Bait these with chicken necks and let them down to the bottom and pinfish, a Florida version of small sea bream, pour in. They're waiting for you when you show up to load the boat in the morning.

## Transom Boxes

Transom boxes have been around for a long time and they're still going



World wide, most chamber traps are a variation of one of these fundamental fish and invertebrate designs

strong, particularly aboard flying bridge sport fishermen powered by inboard diesels.

Perforated square or, more commonly, rectangular boxes of different sizes bolted, fibreglassed, or welded to the transom of all-sized vessels serve as highly convenient, trouble-free bait wells capable of maintaining the majority of desirable species.

Placement submerges the bottom half or so below the water line. Advantages include ready access and

complete separation from the inner hull. Disadvantages are normally lack of ability to empty these of water, adding constant weight to your vessel, and the existence of corners as opposed to a round shape, which does not suit some of the faster-swimming, more delicate bait species that tend to bump into the corners repeatedly until they die.

Even if your vessel features outboard motors or an inboard/outboard that restricts available space at the transom, one or two smaller transom wells can be an advantage. Possession of more than one live well confers the ability to separately maintain different species of bait organisms. A transom well might house hardier fish or invertebrates for long trips, or some moderately delicate species of baitfish at least for the duration of a day or night fishing trip.

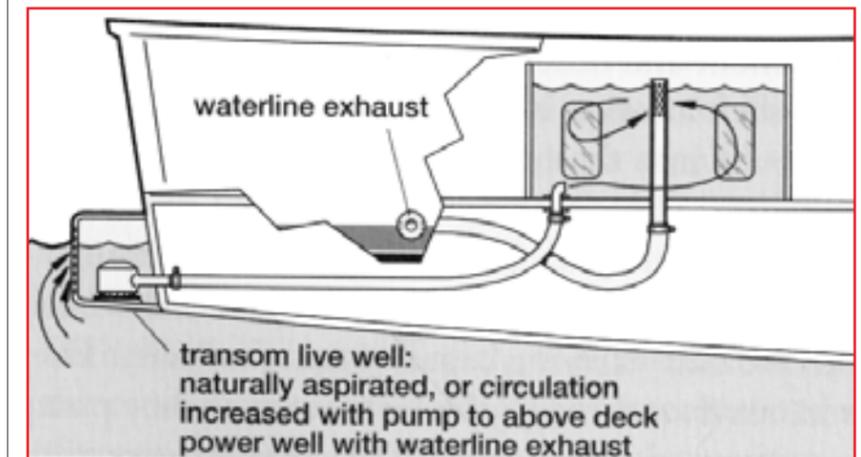
This can free up space and reduce oxygen demand in other live wells, permitting specialty use for selected bait types, especially valuable for carrying species intolerant of each other.

For example, some baitfish, like certain pilchards, tend to shed scales

gills to pump water by the gill filaments, just as a human diaphragm expands and contracts to pump air through our lungs. Species like skipjack tuna don't do this - they depend on swimming fast with their mouths partly open to force water through the gill chambers. If you prevent the ability to swim rapidly and constantly, suffocation occurs quickly.

Innovative sport billfishermen came up with a way to do this for them. They discovered that placing skipjack tuna and other ram-jet breathers head first into short sections of near-vertical pipe and delivering a strong flow of seawater through the apparatus keeps them very much alive, despite the fact that they're immobile. Pipe diameter is sufficient for a relatively close fit around the fish's body. Water exits out the top of the pipe and spills back into the sea, often aided by angling the water-exit end of the pipe mouth slightly aft of vertical. This permits catching one or more tunas on trolling feathers, placing them in ram-jet wells, proceeding to the marlin fishing spot, and putting out fresh, lively baits.

An Australian - well, more



and slime which then clogs the gills of ballyhoo (garfish) if they are in the same well, resulting in their rapid deterioration.

## Ram Jet Transom Wells (Tuna Tubes)

Why do tuna and some other fish species typically die so quickly when tossed into relatively spacious, naturally aspirated live wells of most designs? The major reason is their dependence on ram ventilation to breathe. If you closely examine fish in an aquarium, you'll see them rhythmically opening and closing their

specifically, I should say a Damon Olsen - modification of this idea is the addition of vertical tubes into a live well compartment with good water circulation for the purpose of separating ready-to-go, hooked live baits for "bait and switch" billfishing. Damon uses sections of PVC pipe slightly larger than the diameter of a typical yakka or yellowtail, hooks the bait, and inserts them head down to await the next billfish raised on the teasers. Then, instead of trying to untangle several baits or worse, capture and quickly hook a live bait, he simply snatches one out of a tube and fires it