

# A SERIOUS SYSTEM

By TubeDude

A major hurdle for many floatation fishing (tubes, toons & yaks) “wannabees” is that they are afraid of being laughed at. There’s no denying that tubers and tooners look funny, especially during those first launching and beaching fiascoes. For some new recruits their frustrating initiations are enough to send them whimpering back to their vehicles never to try again.



*Falling or slipping out of your tube while launching or beaching is hilarious to onlookers, but can be potentially dangerous to newbie tubers.*

*It’s a good idea to practice a few times before risking anything more than your dignity. And, stay in shallow water until you are both comfortable and in control.*

As I often suggest, you should be properly coached and try a couple of practice dunks before your first serious solo fishing launch. Otherwise, the ordeal of carrying all of your gear to the water and getting it safely afloat can win a prize on a funniest videos show.

We floataholics can be the objects of outrageous derision while fishing. How can anyone take you seriously when you’re paddling around like a duck stuck in reverse? You don’t exactly inspire “shock and awe” in your silly craft.

Even worse is when “normal” people see you out there during the colder months with ice on the water and/or snow on the shoreline. They just shake their heads in disbelief. And, your family may have you declared mentally incompetent if you launch your craft in waters inhabited by snakes and gators...or in “shark-filled” ocean venues.

The biggest “attitude adjustment” needs to be the realization that a good floatation system is not a just a toy or novelty. Tubes or ‘toons are not merely “a poor man’s bass boat”...cheap substitutes for “real” boats. Modern models of some craft are getting ever more “spendy” but you can still get completely geared up for less than a monthly payment on a new bass sled.

It’s okay to save money. Just because you spend less doesn’t mean you won’t catch more fish. By choosing to fish from a tube or toon...or kayak...rather than a boat, you do have to give up a few things...such as speed and range. That just means that you fish less water...but you fish it more thoroughly. Of course, by giving up the boat you ALSO have to give up the big down payment, monthly payments, insurance, gas and oil, costly repairs, etc. You also have to do without all of the “enjoys” of backing the trailer while launching or loading your boat.

I’m here to tell ya that fishing from a tube, toon or yak CAN be more effective than from a boat. It is almost always better than bank tanglin’. An angler with decent tackle and good fishing skills can reasonably expect to catch more fish from a floatation craft...on the same waters and under the same conditions. Obviously there will be exceptions but for the most part it is true.

I have been a serious float tube fisherman most of my life...over 60 years now. For much of that time my wife has been my tubing companion on waters all across the country. I can recall many trips in which we out-fished both boaters and “bank tangles” by a wide margin. In fact, I can’t recall many (if any) times we did not catch more and bigger fish than virtually any and all other anglers on the same waters.

False modesty aside, we are pretty fair fisherfolk. When we elect to fish from shore we usually catch lots of fish too. We also catch plenty when we lower our standards and join friends in their boats. However, we have proven to ourselves that we do noticeably better from our tubes whenever we fish the same waters under similar conditions. And, we just plain enjoy it more.



*TubeBabe and TubeDude with a “double basket” ceremony...while fishing together on a wedding anniversary. What a girl!*

*This double limit of “cookie cutter” channel cats, from Utah’s Willard Bay Reservoir, came on a day when boaters or bank tangles did not do as well.*

Most of the credit for our floatation fishing success is attributable to the unique advantages afforded by this style of fishing. Well-equipped floatation craft enable you to find fish more easily and to present the lures or bait differently than with most other fishing methods. Equally important is the stealth mode. While in a floatation craft you are less likely to spook the fish than you would be in the quietest of boats...even while positioned directly over them in shallow water,.

Tubes and toons have been around for a long time now and the novelty has worn off. Still, it is not uncommon for us to draw a crowd as we return to our beaching site, especially if we have fish flopping in our baskets. Besides the typical throng of curious kids there are frequently other fisherfolk with interested questions about our gear and our techniques. We also find ourselves in floatation fishing conversations in many non-fishing situations.

Whenever I am “on the spot” and I’m being questioned by fellow anglers, I often hear some form of the question “Why do you think flotation fishing is better?” I generally answer in two parts. It’s kind of like the old “good news and bad news” jokes. The first response is that this kind of fishing IS NOT ALWAYS better. The other answer is it USUALLY IS better. “BETTER” depends upon the type of fishing to which flotation fishing is being compared...in the same waters, for the same species and under the same conditions.

### VS BANK FISHING

Bank fishing is a natural point of comparison. There are several obvious limitations for the shore bound angler. Let’s discuss how flotation fishing stacks up.

First, fishing from shore is usually restricted to places where there is easy access by roads or trails to the intended fishing spots. The type of terrain may also limit or prevent easy access. If you can’t get down the face of a cliff, or fight your way through or around a barrier of brush or reeds, you will be unable to fish from shore. Tubers and tooners, on the other hand, are able to launch wherever it is convenient, approach the best fishing spots from the open water and fish them easily.

Second, when casting from shore you can fish only the water within range of your longest casts. There may also be limitations of fences, rocks, trees or other obstructions. These prevent easy movement or relocation along the shoreline. If you are afloat you can fish anywhere along the shoreline...as near or far from the shore and as deep as you wish.

Third, tubers and tooners and yakkers can utilize a greater variety of fishing techniques. For example, you can retrieve parallel to the shoreline at whatever depth or distance from shore the fish are holding...while afloat. If you are on the bank, casting straight out from shore, you are fishing in “high percentage” water only a small percentage of the time on each cast. Your retrieves intersect prime holding areas at an angle and then only briefly.

When you fish from a floating platform you have the option of casting either in toward shore or out from shore...as well as fishing parallel to the shoreline. On some days the fish respond better to an “upslope” presentation. On other days, such as when crawdads are moving down into deeper water, a lure bounced “down slope” will get more response. Once you find the fish holding at a specific depth along the shoreline you can position your craft to allow efficient working of that specific zone...an option not available to the shorebound fisherman.

*A limit of 6 walleyes from Utah Lake...in the days before slot limits on walleyes. These fish ranged from 5 to 8 pounds and were only part of a 30 fish day.*

*These fish were caught in a spot not fishable from shore or by wading...and difficult to find and fish by boat. Ya gotta love float tubes for being able to fish places that others can’t.*



Fishing from floatation craft also provides the opportunity to make vertical presentations. The best a shore angler can hope for is to get lucky and have a cast sink to exactly the right spot at the right depth. Tubers and tooners with sonar can pinpoint where the fish are holding, on any kind of structure, and then drop their offerings right into the fishes' dining room every time.

In short, the biggest truth in fishing is that you can't catch 'em where they ain't. If you are able to find the fish, and then position yourself to keep your bait or lure where they can see it and respond to it, you will catch more fish. Those are some of the reasons why floatation fishing is almost always better than fishing from shore.

## **VS BOAT FISHING**

How about the comparison between fishing from a boat versus a tube, toon or yak? Naturally, there are some advantages in favor of the boats. First and foremost boats allow anglers to cover more water. They are faster and enable you to fish much greater distances from the ramp.

Of course you can also store more "stuff" and carry passengers in a boat. But, for those of us who prefer the simple and solitary aspects of floatation fishing those are not advantages. You can always go afloat with one or more other fishing buddies and you don't have to worry about crowding them or babysitting them. In a floatation craft you are on your own.

That's about it. Speed and range are the only real advantages to fishing from a boat as opposed to tubes or 'toons (without motors). Yaks are somewhere in between. That's why there are a few dedicated boat-owners who lash a tube or toon to their boats before blasting off up-lake. Once they get to that special creek channel, rocky shoreline or flooded forest, they tie off or anchor their boats and crawl into their "finesse floaters". Getting to the best spots sometimes requires a boat. Getting fish is sometimes enhanced by fishing quiet and sneaky from a floatation craft.

One BIG minus to boats is that they are noisier. Even "quiet" boats make more noise than floatation craft. And, even the most jaded fish don't bite as well when a noisy boat or Jet Ski has just strafed them...even if they are more or less accustomed to boat traffic.

The quietest trolling motors can still spook touchy fish...whether on a boat, tube or toon. And, the rattle of anchor chains, dropped tackle boxes, banging oars and other boat noises can shut down the fishing in a hurry. Flotation fishing allows you to approach your quarry in stealth mode.

There have been many occasions when I have been enjoying regular action and seeing lots of fish on my sonar screen. Then, the first motorized watercraft comes roaring by, shattering the silence. The fish on my screen disappear and my rod remains unbent thereafter. Game over.

This scenario also plays out in reverse. There have been late afternoon and evening excursions on which I marked fish on my sonar but began to get strikes only after the boating traffic subsided. This is why fishing on heavily trafficked waters is sometimes better at night.

Flotation fishing seldom spooks fish. I have had lots of trips on which my craft has become "floating structure", a shady gathering spot for crappie, bluegill or other fish. When I recognize this situation I keep my legs still, remaining perfectly motionless. The fish marks on my sonar screen increase. And, when I drop something down to the new arrivals it gets accepted. You can often catch fish right below your tube or toon in very shallow water. No spooking here.

One of my most vivid memories of becoming a fishy attraction occurred while tubing on Pineview Reservoir, east of Ogden, Utah. It was a beautiful calm day with no breeze to move me out of position. I was sitting absolutely motionless without kicking my fins.

I had been absorbed in tying on a new lure, not paying attention to anything below me in the water. As I looked up from completing my knot I peered into the clear water and was startled to observe a "sea of eyes". There below me was a conglomeration of fish looking directly up at me. These included bluegills, several nice crappies and even a couple of juvenile largemouth. I chuckled to myself as I imagined them saying "Okay, guys, on three we pull him under."

Since that memorable trip this lake has acquired a population of tiger muskies. If I had seen a couple of those toothy critters eyeing me I probably would have done a pretty good impression of a Jet Ski blasting across the lake. At the very least I would have walked on water.

Quiet is a prerequisite for stealth. Early and late in the day some fish cruise close to the shorelines, either searching for food or enjoying warmer waters in the shallows. Little fish don't grow up to become bigger fish if they are not cautious. The survivors are more likely to be more sensitive to danger. Any unnatural sound or vibration triggers a quick departure to deep water.

As previously mentioned, even the quietest trolling motors can send nervous bank-hugging foragers scooting for deeper water. You might be throwing long casts well ahead of the boat but the larger and more cautious fish might have already shut down or beaten a retreat. Go ahead and curse the moon phase, a weather front, the fisheries management folks or whatever. The truth is that the fish heard you coming and were smart enough to keep their mouths closed or move out.

**Fishing from a tube or toon is inherently quieter. But, ultra spooky fish can still hear you** and depart before you can reach them. I have quietly approached potentially productive shoreline only to see big swirls as fish in the shallows bolt toward deeper water. It may have been the result of a change in my kicking rhythm, the noise of a lure box being snapped closed, rods rattling together in my rod holders or who knows what else? The point is that I made some sound or vibration that was out of the ordinary and the fish boogied.

As a general rule, however, you seldom spook fish under normal conditions. I have been able to sneak to within a rod length of feeding fish in extremely shallow water. That is always a fun experience. It's a hoot to get up close and personal and to observe fish doing what fish do without being alarmed by your presence.

By avoiding unnecessary movement or noise I have literally been able to "force feed" my fly or lure to active fish...dropping it right into their mouths. Call it cheating if you want. I think it's sorta neat to pull off something that probably couldn't be duplicated in any other way.

One of my favorite recollections of this type of situation happened on a float tube trip on a brackish water canal on the Gulf of Mexico side of the Mississippi River delta south of New Orleans. I launched my tube through the gooey mud at the edge of the canal and kicked a hundred yards or so west of where the rutted road ended...far beyond the longest casts of the bank tanglers.

This was one of my first exploratory shots at redfish and speckled sea trout. It was a new spot and I was prepared to accept a skunking if I couldn't find fish or figure them out. My first few casts made it back to my tube unmolested. I changed lures and tried different retrieves. Then, I got into a school of sub-legal sea trout. These ten to twelve inch juniors (14 inches to be legal) hit every cast for about a half hour. I had my fun with them until they drifted away on the falling tide.

I floated down with the flow toward a junction with another canal flowing in from the south. As I approached I saw "tailing" and other fishy activity along the far bank. I kicked across the current of the outgoing tide and positioned myself just upstream from the swirls. I didn't know what the fish were, how big they might be or what they would hit, if anything.

My first cast was with the same lure the sea trout had liked. This was a 2 1/2" white twister with a 1/16 oz white head and a hot red eye. I pitched it along the outside edge of the activity to avoid frightening whatever was there. As soon as the light jig touched bottom in the shallow water I raised the rod tip and began hopping it back toward me. It didn't get far.

A 16" redfish whacked it and took off like a bonefish on the flats. The drag on my light reel sang and I said through my smile "Well, this is what you came fer." That's a little ritual I go through whenever everything works just right and the song of my straining reel is accompanied by the hum of my taut line.

What's the rest of the story? I dug my heels into the mud with my back facing the flow of the tide. This helped reduce the ruckus since I did not have to kick to maintain position up current from the feeding reds. Once I was "anchored", and made no noise or movements, some of the school moved up around me and beyond me. I was surrounded by tailing fish and felt them bumping against my wader-clad legs in the murky water. I caught fish after fish, cast after cast.

Then, one of the "locals" came motoring up the canal in a flat-bottomed wooden boat. Long before he got near me the water in front of me boiled. The tails and the swirls disappeared all together. The fish were gone.

The local roared up directly below me where he had seen me hook my last fish and heaved over a heavy cinder block anchor. Next, he brought out a stiff boat rod onto which he had rigged the locally popular popping cork outfit. To add insult to injury, as I watched with unbelieving eyes, he heaved that cumbersome rig right at me. Danged near hit me too.

I "diplomatically" suggested that he was taking my fishing spot and that he had already scared off all the fish. He just glared at me and challenged, "Ah bin doon dis a long tam!"

The fishing was over, the water was getting shallow and I had "over-funned" anyway. I kicked back upcurrent to my launch spot and floundered out of the muddy shoreline without getting bogged down or losing anything. I never went back to that spot.



*This is a picture of a first-time tuber and the mixed catch of redfish, sea trout and flounder he caught. He was already an accomplished angler on the brackish water canals of southern Louisiana, but we were able to fish a spot he had always wanted to try but never could. No boat access and very difficult to fish from shore.*

*The fish were in shallow water, and very spooky. We had to approach them from the deeper center of the canal and cast into the "skinny" water where they were feeding.*

*My co-worker wanted to buy the tube I had let him use, but he was happy with the new one I helped him find. Another tuber was born.*

Next comparison. While boats can go farther and faster than float tubes or pontoons, they are limited in terms of where they can go. True, some crazy bassaholics recklessly force their poor boats through some hellish cover and prop-eating structure. But, there are plenty of situations where you will never see a boat...but are likely to find tubers and tooners.

I have a sadistic streak in me when it comes to the old boats versus float tubes conflict. I've had too many boats use my float tube as a slalom pylon as they raced by only a couple of rod lengths away. I believe in "Don't get mad, get even."

I take fiendish delight in working my way back in to spots inaccessible to boats and then proceeding to catch fish after fish...that the boaters never have a shot at. I love to hear grown men cry...especially during a tournament when they are fighting to put a couple of keepers in the live well and I repeatedly toss back fish that would cinch it for them. Been there, done that, much fun.

One aspect of lightweight flotation systems is that you can pack them in to remote fishin' holes. They're great for small ponds, little oxbows and backwaters that are otherwise inaccessible to everybody but bank tangles. Some of my most memorable fishing experiences have been the result of first discovering semi-virgin tubeable water and then finding a way to get my system launched in the liquid...without getting shot, bitten, gored or lost. There are far more of these opportunities than people would expect. Many are pure heaven to fish.

The next point of comparison might be positioning. I can't recall many fishing excursions that have not been at least partially affected by the wind. It always seems to hit just when you locate a concentration of fish or put your markers out on a great little hump or bit of structure.

Once a breeze comes up boaters have to devote time and energy to the trolling motor to keep the boat positioned for fishing. When fighting the wind from a boat you are blown into the next county every time you take your foot off the controls to unhook a fish, retie a lure or suffer a lapse in concentration. Without new innovations such as "Spot Lock"...automatic GPS positioning with your trolling motor...it is tough to position a boat in the wind without anchoring.

Also, when pulling the boat into the breeze you will likely be casting into the wind. That can be tough duty, especially with fly rods or baitcasting gear. The extra effort makes for hard work and the effect on timing can result in poor casts and "professional overruns" on your reels.

Wind is also a bane to floatation anglers. Tubers usually manage better than higher profile pontoons but fishing in the breeze simply means more work. With a lower profile tubers can maintain reasonable position and continue to fish "hands free" merely by kicking more with their fins. This process becomes almost automatic once you get the hang of it.

If you have efficient fins (big), good stamina and a wind-worthy craft, you can hang in there with the best of them when a breeze comes up. I personally believe that a "fishing ripple" makes for better fishing. It breaks up the surface visibility and helps fish feel less vulnerable to danger from above. Fish tend to rise higher in the water column and feed more aggressively when there is a ripple. When a light breeze comes up I anticipate more action along with more exercise.

While dealing with a breeze from a tube or a 'toon you typically want to keep the wind at your back. In a boat, trolling motors pull the boat forward. In a tube or toon you kick backwards.

This makes fishing in light winds doable from a tube. You position your craft upwind from the spot you want to fish. Then, you keep your fins kicking just enough to hold yourself exactly where you need to be... making wind-aided casts. Of course, you can also use a light anchor.

*Fighting a large channel catfish on Utah Lake. This was during a strong north "breeze" during which it was necessary to keep the tube pointed back into the wind and cast downwind to the holding area for the fish. Position was maintained by keeping up a strong rhythmic kick to remain in just the right spot.*



By casting downwind you expend less energy and maintain more control and better feel of your presentation. Fishing a crank bait, spinner bait or heavy jig, it is not difficult to keep a tight line and feel most strikes. If you are pitching light stuff; for crappies, walleyes or finicky bass, “touch” is critical. Casting downwind can keep you in the game.

It’s almost impossible to fish lightweight lures upwind or crosswind. If the wind doesn’t actually blow your casts awry it will usually develop a “belly” in your line. That makes it tough to feel a subtle take. In a properly positioned flotation craft you can easily keep yourself as close as you want for pinpoint accuracy, complete control and maximum sensitivity. If it ever gets too strong to hold position or to feel your lures it’s time to head for shore.

That brings us to the next point of comparison: vertical presentations. If you are fishing from a boat on a calm day, with aggressive fish below, you may enjoy great sport spooning or jigging for fish right under you. But, if there is even the slightest bit of current or breeze...without Spot Lock...you get a good workout trying to keep the boat in position.

Flotation craft are ideal for vertical presentations. I devote more words to this style of fishing in the chapter on Tackle and Techniques. For the sake of making a point in this chapter, let’s leave it with the statement that flotation systems are often superior to boats for vertical fishing. Under calm conditions there is not as much advantage. But, when the breezes kick up fin power can keep you close to your marker buoy with little effort.

In the interest of brevity let’s finish off this section with a couple more comparisons: trolling and bottom-bouncing. Boats are clearly better than tubes for trolling. They can cover more water, longer and at higher speed. Many tooners...and increasingly more tubers...add an electric motor to their craft for trolling, and to increase range and speed. But fin-powered craft are totally out of it for trolling any faster than a slow walk. However, for slow speed trolling, drifting or bottom bouncing, within a small area, tubes and toons can actually be as good as or better than boats.

Let’s talk about “bottom-bouncing”. This is a general term that might apply to anything from dragging bait on the bottom to imparting an active lift and drop action on spoons or jigs while moving from spot to spot. It is a great prospecting technique for finding fish. Of course you can bottom bounce from a boat but it’s so much more fun and effective from a tube or toon

Oh yeah. What if you get a snag while bottom bouncing? Recovering your lure while fishing from a tube or toon is usually simpler and more effective. Just kick back over the snag and wiggle and jiggle it until it comes free. It works more often than not. This saves gear and doesn’t spook fish nearly as much as running a boat back and forth over the snagged rig.

One bonus aspect of flotation fishing is easily recognized by newbies after their first session on the water. It’s great exercise. If you are already in reasonably good shape it will help you stay in shape. It is a good “passive” exercise. You are not likely to get really beat up unless you stay out too long, try to go too fast...or have to kick back to your take out spot against wind-driven waves. On the other hand you may find that you are using muscles you never knew you had. If so, you will be reminded the next day and for a few days thereafter.

Several years ago I was visiting a small tackle shop. The proprietor...a friend and fishing buddy...introduced me to an older gentleman in his store. He had told the old guy that I was an “expert” on float tube fishing. It seems this gent was interested in the relatively new sport of tubing and had been looking at gear and asking questions. Once introductions were out of the way the old boy got a gleam in his eye and began a series of queries.

One of the first questions was whether or not float tubing was strenuous. I answered that it did not have to be, with proper attention to location, weather and type of fishing to be done. The rest of the questions were mostly related to what components were necessary to properly assemble a good float tube fishing system. I helped him lay out what he needed from the inventory on the shelves of my friends’ store.

As my friend finished helping another customer he came over to the pile of tube, waders, fins, boots, net, basket, etc. The old timer got between us and took us each by one arm. Then, he made a proposal. He said he would buy the whole package...but only on the condition that I would escort him on his maiden voyage and help him “learn the ropes”. With my friend giving me a pleading look, I agreed. We made arrangements to meet the next Saturday morning.

I took the old gent up to Willard Bay Reservoir, north of Ogden, Utah, for some springtime catfish. I drove my station wagon to within a few feet of an easy launching spot near the North Marina. We quickly set up the tubes and hit the water. The catfish were there and they put on a good show for the new recruit. I almost had to drag him off the water after we had our limits.

The rest of the story? Once we were off the water the old boy divulged that he was a heart surgeon...and a heart patient himself. He was investigating float tube fishing as a suitable form of fishing and exercise for some of his heart patients. His verdict? That float tubing was perfect passive exercise if conducted under mild weather conditions and if it did not involve carrying too much weight too far. He later formed a heart patients’ float tube club. Of course I helped.

Yes, flotation fishing is a serious fishing system. To enjoy the full benefits of the positive aspects of this sport you should already be at least moderately accomplished in the basic fundamentals of fishing. Tubing and tooning will not remedy your bad casting or compensate for poor tackle, wrong bait or lure selection, etc. Putting on a pair of waders and some swim fins and launching an air-filled fishing platform will not transform a “tangler” into an angler.

Over time, flotation fishing should help improve both your skill level and your success ratio if you fish diligently and attentively. When fishing from a tube or toon you are closer to the water and your quarry. You are more in tune with the elements of each excursion such as air temperature, water temperature, water clarity, current, wind, noise, etc. In short, you will have a better feel for what you did right and what you did wrong and under what set of circumstances.



*TubeDude...all tricked out and doing battle with a big Utah Lake catfish.*

*With electric motor, sonar, rod racks, walkie talkies, digital camera, fish basket and landing net...plus marker buoys, wiping rag, vest, sunglasses, hat, bug repellent, fish attractant, several rod & reel rigs and plenty of tackle in lure boxes...this tuber may be better equipped to catch fish than are most boaters and bankers.*

There is a logical comparison between tubing or tooning and bow hunting. An archer must be stealthier, know the terrain better and be an overall better hunter than one armed with a gun. In the same vein, a flotation fisherman will usually end up being a more proficient angler than will a boat fisherman who starts out with essentially the same abilities. Flotation fishing will sharpen your skills...along with providing more personal enjoyment at times.

It is an interesting development that there are more and more websites and fishing clubs forming around fishing from tubes or toons...and kayaks. These groups often target specific waters or species...fresh water or salt. In some parts of the country there are regular tournaments held for flotation fishing only. Must be something to this.