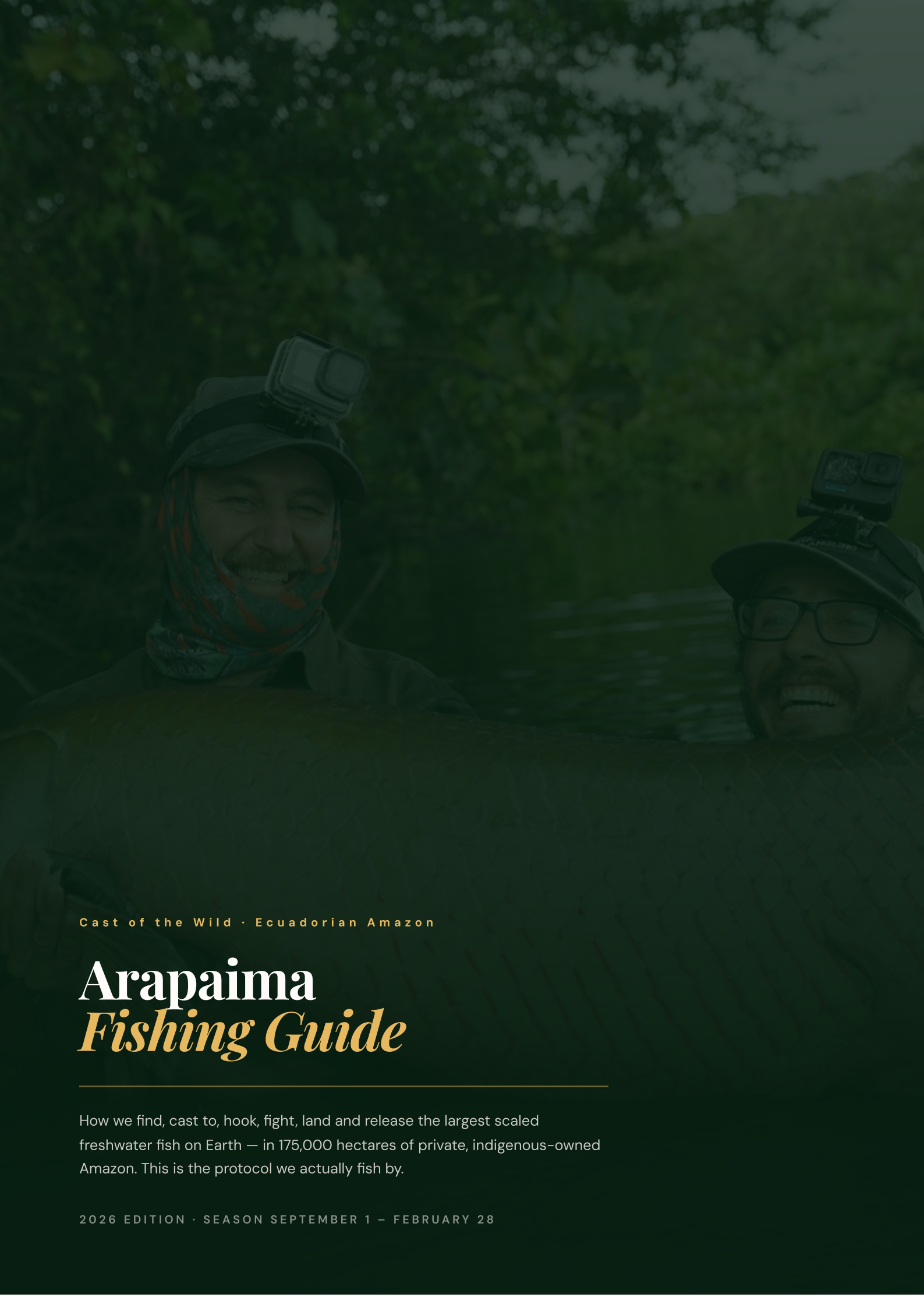


A photograph of two men in a boat, likely on a river in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Both men are wearing GoPro cameras on their foreheads. The man on the left is wearing a patterned neck gaiter and a cap, and is smiling. The man on the right is wearing glasses and a cap, and is also smiling. The background is a dense, green forest.

Cast of the Wild · Ecuadorian Amazon

Arapaima

Fishing Guide

How we find, cast to, hook, fight, land and release the largest scaled freshwater fish on Earth — in 175,000 hectares of private, indigenous-owned Amazon. This is the protocol we actually fish by.

2026 EDITION · SEASON SEPTEMBER 1 – FEBRUARY 28

WHAT IS IN HERE

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Arapaima fishing is not casting and reeling. It is reading a silent lagoon for the roll of a breath, then putting one lure in exactly the right place before the fish has finished moving.

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02	How It Behaves	The roll, the territory, and why the season is what it is
03	Lure or Bait	Two honest methods, and when we use each
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BEFORE YOU READ ON

Everything here describes how we fish in **our** territory, under rules set by **the community's own Fishing Committee**. Some of it will contradict what you have read about arapaima elsewhere. Where it does, the difference is usually deliberate: several of our rules cost us landed fish on purpose, because a fish that swims away is worth more to this fishery than a fish in a photograph.

Your guide's authority on the water is binding. When the guide says the fish goes back now, it goes back now — ahead of the photograph, ahead of the measurement, ahead of the catch itself.

THE FISH

01

A living fossil that *has to breathe*

The arapaima is one of the largest freshwater fish alive, and the only one whose single most important habit is also the angler's only reliable way of finding it: it must come to the surface to breathe air.

Where it lives

Arapaima live in slow, warm, oxygen-poor water — floodplain lakes, blackwater lagoons and the quiet channels that join them. That is almost exactly the description of the territory we fish. They tolerate dissolved-oxygen levels that would suffocate nearly anything else, because they do not depend on their gills alone: a modified, lung-like swim bladder lets them gulp air straight from the surface.

That adaptation is the reason they thrive in still, swampy water. It is also the reason they were so easy to hunt to collapse in the twentieth century, and the reason we can find them at all without electronics.

A note on the name

You will see this fish called *Arapaima gigas* almost everywhere. We write ***Arapaima sp.*** and the distinction is real: the genus was treated as containing a single species for 145 years until a 2013 revision described a new one and revalidated another. Official Ecuadorian technical documents use *Arapaima aff. gigas*, and a separate, still-undescribed *Arapaima sp.* is listed for this very reserve. Nobody has yet confirmed which species swims in the water you will be fishing.

Life cycle

Breeding follows the flood pulse. Pairs excavate a shallow nest in sand or mud, and after spawning the male guards the eggs. Both parents then shepherd the fry for months, mouthing them, patrolling the perimeter, driving off anything that approaches. Around nine in ten nests are built under woody vegetation.

Juveniles grow at a rate almost unheard of in fish, approaching a metre in their first year. Sexual maturity arrives at a length that varies enormously across the basin — from about 1.4 m in some systems to over 2 m in the upper Amazon.

TYPICAL LANDED

1.8 – 2.2 m

roughly 60 – 100 kg

TROPHY

2.2 – 2.6 m

100 – 140 kg and up

HISTORIC MAXIMUM

4 m · 200 kg

exceedingly rare today

LIFESPAN

≈ 15 years

in the wild

SURFACE INTERVAL

15 – 45 min

longer in the biggest fish

LAKE FIDELITY, LOW WATER

≈ 74 %

they stay put once water drops

Fish at the historic maximum belong to a century ago, before the collapse described in section 14. What comes out of this water today is the first two rows — measured by the people who handled the fish.

HOW IT BEHAVES

02 The roll is *the whole game*

An arapaima is a **lethargic, opportunistic feeder**. Most of the time it is patrolling a lagoon slowly, looking for an easy meal — a medium-sized fish, a large insect, whatever is unlucky enough to be in its path. It is not chasing anything down. Understanding that is what makes the retrieve in section 07 make sense.

The roll

The single most useful thing to know about this fish is the simplest. It must surface to breathe, and when it does it comes up with an audible gulp and a visible roll. **The interval runs from about fifteen minutes to forty-five**, depending on the fish's size, its activity level, and the water temperature and oxygen. Big fish stay down longest, which is exactly what makes the biggest fish hardest to track.

Our guides do not find arapaima with electronics. They find them by reading breathing rhythms across a silent lagoon — noting where a fish came up, when, and in which direction it was moving — and then positioning the canoe for the next breath *before it happens*.

The other tells

A roll is the obvious one. There are quieter ones your guide will point out before you learn to see them yourself: **wakes** pushed by a fish moving just under the surface, **shadows** against a pale bottom, and the tip of a **fin** breaking the film. Any of those is a target, and often a better one than a roll, because the fish has not yet gone back down.

You are not fishing water. You are fishing one animal, whose next appearance you are trying to predict to within a few metres and a few minutes.

Spooky, and territorial

A big arapaima holds a stretch of channel or a corner of a lagoon, and it is exceptionally sensitive to noise, to shadow, and to vibration through the hull of a canoe. Long casts and genuine silence are not politeness — they are the difference between a shot and no shot at all. More opportunities are lost to a knock against the gunwale than to a bad cast.

Why the season is what it is

Rising water pushes arapaima into the flooded forest to spawn. Falling water concentrates them back into lakes and channels we can reach and, more importantly, *read*. That is why our season runs **September 1 through February 28**, and why the rest of the year is not worth fishing here.

Spawning, honestly

Arapaima can reproduce all year round, but in our area it **tends to peak around February and March**. That means the tail end of our season can overlap the spawn, and we would rather say so than pretend otherwise.

What we do about it is absolute: **we do not cast to, or fish for, any specimen guarding a nest or fry**. That rule is enforceable precisely because this is sight fishing — you can see what you are casting at, so there is no excuse.

CHOOSING A METHOD

03 Lure or bait

There are two honest ways to put a hook in front of an arapaima. We lead with the lure, and the reason is conservation before it is sport.

Lure — the primary method

- Large swimbaits and jerkbaits, **15–20 cm**, suspending wherever possible.
- A pure sight-fishing game: you watch for the roll, then cast into the fish's path. Section 06 covers where, and section 07 covers how to work it.
- The higher-skill, higher-adrenaline option, and what most conventional-tackle and fly anglers come here for.
- **Lures do not produce deep hooking** in our field experience. That is why they lead.

Fly

Bring a **10–12 weight** with large baitfish streamers and slow-sink or sinking tippets, on a **no-stretch core fly line** — the hookset is the entire problem, and stretch anywhere costs you the fish.

Bait — the subsidiary method

- Aimara, cichlids, pike-cichlids and other medium-sized baitfish, dead or live.
- **Under a float, 80–150 cm deep**, adjusted to water level. Floats of **120–150 g**.
- **Circle hooks only**, 10/0 to 12/0.
- More passive. Fish commit fully to natural bait, so it often produces more bites — though not a better hook-up ratio.

BOTTOM RIGS ARE PROHIBITED FOR ARAPAIMA

Bait fishes **under a float, never on the bottom**. The float is what gives you the exact moment of the take, and without that moment the ten-second rule overleaf cannot be enforced — which is how fish end up hooked in the gut instead of the mouth.

Bottom rigs *are* permitted for **catfish**, fished at night **from the main river** — not from the platform. The rule is species-specific and not transferable.

Which one, and when

Skill and involvement	Lure: active, high-skill, sight-fishing · Bait: passive, more consistent
Best conditions	Lure: clear water, visible rolling fish · Bait: off-colour water, deep-holding or badly spooked fish
Hooks	Lure: two single in-line 5/0 · Bait: circle 10/0–12/0
The hookset	Lure: hit it, hard, three or four times · Bait: reel into it, never strike

We lead with lures, and switch to bait when water rises and fish scatter, when a trip is running long without a fish, or when an angler's casting makes lure fishing unrealistic.

THE PROTOCOL

04 The three rules that *decide whether it lives*

Hooking location is the single largest factor in whether a released fish survives. Everything below exists to keep the hook in the corner of the mouth and out of the throat.

1 • Float mandatory. Bottom rig prohibited.

For arapaima, bait fishes under a float — always. The float is the instrument that tells you the take has happened, at the instant it happens. A bottom rig tells you nothing until the fish has already swallowed.

2 • Ten seconds, maximum, from the float going under to the hookset.

Count it. Ten seconds and you go, whatever is happening.

This rule costs us fish and we keep it anyway. Waiting thirty seconds would land considerably more arapaima — and it would do it by letting them swallow the bait. That trade is not available to a fishery that intends to release everything it catches.

3 • Lure first. Bait second.

In our field experience lures do not produce deep hooking at all. And with bait, the circle hook does the work mechanically: as the line tightens it rotates and seats itself in the corner of the jaw. That is the decisive mitigation, and it works by design rather than by the angler's goodwill.

NO TREBLE HOOKS. EVER.

Every lure that comes into this fishery has its factory trebles replaced with **two single in-line hooks, 5/0**.

Singles hold just as well; they come out in a fraction of the time; they do far less damage to a fish we are about to release; and they are dramatically safer for the guide who has both arms around a thrashing hundred-kilo animal.

What the numbers actually look like

BITES PER DAY

1 – 2

the usual rhythm

BITES THAT BECOME A LANDED FISH

10 – 20 %

the bony mouth, the jumps

No-bite days happen, and they are hard — but they are very rare. And some days are exceptional: upwards of ten bites in a single day. Those are per-day and per-bite figures, and they are the honest ones.

GEAR

05 Tackle specification

An arapaima's mouth is bone. Its scales are armour. Its first run strips line in seconds. Gear that is merely "strong enough" is not: it will not drive a hook through that jaw on the set, it will not survive the head-shakes, and it will let the fight run long enough to exhaust a fish we need to release healthy.

Everything below is available to rent at the lodge. There is no need to travel with rod tubes and tackle boxes unless you want to fish your own. If you do, send us the specification before you buy anything.

ITEM	SPECIFICATION
Rod	Extra-heavy spinning, long, for precise long-distance casts — with a stiff enough backbone to drive a hookset through a bone-hard mouth
Reel	Spinning, size 6000–7000
Main line	Braid, 100 lb
Leader	150–200 lb fluorocarbon or heavy mono
Lure hooks	Two single in-line hooks, 5/0. Factory trebles removed and replaced
Bait hooks	Circle hooks, 10/0 to 12/0. Nothing else
Lures	Swimbait and jerkbaits 15–20 cm , suspending where possible. Natural and bright patterns both work
Fly	10–12 wt , large baitfish streamers, slow-sink or sinking tippet, no-stretch core line
Float	120–150 g , bait set 80–150 cm deep
Terminal	Heavy ball-bearing swivels, oversized split rings, $\frac{1}{8}$ oz sliding sinkers
Personal	Pliers, line cutters, gloves, polarised sunglasses, spare hooks and leaders

SPLIT RINGS AND SWIVELS ARE NOT A DETAIL

More fish are lost here to a straightened split ring or a failed swivel than to a broken line. When you re-hook a lure with singles, the ring has to be rated for the same load as everything else in the system. Oversize them.

Polarised lenses

This is sight fishing on dark water. Good polarised glasses are not a comfort item — they are the difference between seeing a wake at forty metres and seeing nothing at all. Bring a spare pair if you have one.

06

ON THE WATER

Casting to *a rolling fish*

When a fish surfaces to breathe it goes back down slowly, still travelling in the direction it was pointed. You are not casting at where it was. You are casting at where it is about to be.

Where to put it

The target is roughly **1.5 metres in front of the fish and about 2 metres past its position** — beyond it, along its line of travel.

Casting past the fish rather than on top of it does two things at once. It keeps the splash away from an animal that spooks easily, and it buys the lure time to sink so that it **intercepts the fish's path** rather than arriving above it. What you want is for the lure to pass right in front of the arapaima's head — and then stop.

Adjust both the cast and the retrieve according to how long the cast took you and where the lure actually landed. A slow cast means the fish has moved further; a lure that landed short means you start working it sooner.

BE READY, THEN TAKE ONE BREATH

Finger on the line, bail open, rod in hand, before anything happens. When a fish shows, your heart rate goes up and the adrenaline arrives — and **the first opportunity is the best one**, so do not dither.

But do not rush the cast either. Take one breath, then make it precise. Over a week, the difference between the angler who is always ready and the one sitting down when the fish rolls is a trip with fish and a trip without.

Working the area without burning it

Arapaima do not usually travel far from where they surfaced — unless they hear or feel you. So the area around a roll is worth real, disciplined attention.

- Keep casting into the same general area, in front of the fish, moving about **one metre further forward with each cast**.
- Once you have covered four or five metres, **work your way back across**, and around the point where you saw it rise.
- Think of a **five-metre radius** around the roll, weighted toward the side the head was pointing. That is your water.
- **Do not cast more than about five metres past** the point where you saw the fish, and no more than **ten metres in front of it**. Beyond that you are fishing empty water.
- When you have worked the distance the fish is likely to be in and there is still thirty metres of line out, **reel it straight in without working it** and cast again. Retrieving dead water wastes the shot.

IF YOU HIT THE FISH, IT IS GONE

Line or lure landing on the animal spooks it almost every time. That is the cost of a cast placed on top of the fish rather than past it, and it usually ends that fish for the session.

Listen to your guide. Only his experience will tell you whether to hold and stay ready for a precise cast on the next roll, keep screening the area, concentrate on one spot because he has seen something you have not, or leave and start working a different fish altogether.

ON THE WATER

07 Working the lure

The action of the lure draws the fish's attention. The pause is when it commits. Almost every strike comes on a pause, so do not be afraid to take plenty of them.

This follows directly from what the animal is: a lethargic, opportunistic feeder patrolling slowly for an easy meal. It is not built to chase. A lure that never stops moving is a lure it will watch and decline.

Three retrieves that work

There is no single correct rhythm, and the right one changes day to day. These are the three shapes to work through:

- **Fast, quick, small jerks separated by short pauses.** Often the key when fish are active.
- **Long sweeps of the rod with two-second pauses,** reeling in the slack between sweeps.
- **Something in between.** Most days it is.

REEL THE SLACK, NOT THE LURE

On the long-sweep retrieve, the reeling exists only to recover the slack the sweep created. **Make sure you are taking up line without moving the lure.** If the lure creeps forward during what should be a dead pause, you have removed the exact moment the fish was going to eat.

The pause in front of the head

Everything in section 06 was aimed at one moment: the lure arriving in front of the fish's head, on its line of travel, at its depth. When it gets there, **stop it.** That hanging, suspended pause — which is why we specify suspending lures — is the presentation. An opportunistic feeder does not have to decide to hunt. It only has to decide to open its mouth.

WHEN NOTHING IS SHOWING

Between rolls, keep working the water your guide indicates with the same discipline. Wakes, shadows and fin tips are all targets, and a fish that has not yet gone back down is a better one than a memory of a roll two minutes old.

08

THE TAKE

The hookset — *lure*

You have a split second. An arapaima engulfs its prey and crushes it between its bony tongue and the roof of its mouth in an instant — and the moment it registers that what it has is not a fish, it spits it out in the blink of an eye.

What it feels like

Most of the time it is just a **thump** — much closer to a walleye or a zander than to a ferocious strike. Sometimes it feels like you have hit a log. You might have.

WHEN IN DOUBT, SET THE HOOK

Better safe than sorry, every single time. The cost of setting into a submerged branch is a moment of embarrassment. The cost of not setting into a fish is the fish.

How to set it

Set instantly, with everything you have. You are trying to drive a hook through bone, and one polite lift will not do it.

- Hit it hard, immediately.
- Keep the rod **high and bent**, with tension on.
- **Reel down**, and set again.
- And again. **Three or four hooksets**, not one.
- **Never put slack in the line** between them. Slack is how the hook falls out of a mouth that never gave it much purchase to begin with.

Your drag must be almost completely closed

A hookset into bone is impossible against a slipping drag — the line pays out and the hook never moves. So the drag starts **essentially locked**.

Your guide will check it, but **get into the habit of checking it yourself**. It is your fish and it is thirty seconds of attention before the shot arrives.

Then, immediately, let it run

The locked drag is *for the hookset only*. Once you are connected and the fish starts to move, you **gradually lower the drag** so it can run, and from that point you are adjusting it continuously against what is around you. Section 11 covers how.

NATURAL BAIT

09 Casting and setting the bait

There are two ways to present a bait here, and they suit different situations. Both end the same way: reel open, and line paid out by hand.

One — cast to a surfacing fish

A quick, accurate cast landing **1.5 to 2 metres in front of a fish's trajectory** will often be taken within seconds. It can also take minutes. Sometimes an hour.

That is not a reason to keep re-casting. If the piranhas are not active and the fish is still surfacing anywhere near your bait, it is a waiting game — and going unnoticed is the whole tactic. Reeling in and casting again, over and over, announces you. Leave it. The fish will find your bait.

Accuracy is what shortens the wait. A cast landing right where the fish is, versus one five metres away, is often the difference between **waiting two minutes and waiting twenty**.

NOTE THE DIFFERENCE FROM A LURE

With bait you place it **in front of the fish, not past it**. A lure is cast beyond the fish because it needs swimming distance to sink into the path. A bait is already hanging at depth under its float, so it goes straight into the strike zone.

Two — set the bait and wait

The other approach is to place the bait somewhere and let the fish come to it: in the grass, in a pocket, in a corner, alongside a fallen branch. The guides will row in, set it down **in complete silence**, and then withdraw to a strategic vantage point where they can watch both the float and the water.

This is the method for off-colour water, for fish that are holding deep, and for fish that have already been spooked once.

PULL LINE OFF THE REEL BY HAND AS THE GUIDES ROW BACK

Once the bait is placed, **open the reel** — and then physically pull line out with your hand as the canoe withdraws.

If you leave the rod to do it, the line comes off under tension and it will quietly drag the float with it. You will not notice at the time. What you find is that your presentation has crept **ten metres out of the strike zone**, and you have spent an hour fishing empty water.

Listen to your guides. Where the bait goes, how far the canoe withdraws and which vantage point they choose are all judgements built on knowing the individual lagoon.

THE TAKE

10

The hookset — *circle hook*

THIS IS THE OPPOSITE OF SECTION 08

With a lure you strike as hard as you can, three or four times. With a circle hook you **never strike at all**. If you set hard into a circle hook you will pull it straight out of the fish's mouth. Read this section on its own terms.

Keep the reel open

Whenever the bait is in the water, the reel stays **open**. If an arapaima takes it and moves off, it must feel no tension at all — the instant it does, it drops the bait.

The take

Watch the float. It will go under. If instead it starts **wiggling**, look at your guide: that is usually piranhas working the bait rather than an arapaima — but it can be either, and only his experience will tell you which.

When it goes under, **wait ten seconds**. Count them. That is rule 2 from section 04, and it is what keeps the hook out of the fish's throat.

Then, in order

1. **Close the reel.**
2. **Reel down at the speed the distance demands.** A fish a few metres from the boat: reel slowly. Twenty or thirty metres out: medium. A hundred metres or more of line dangling and zigzagging across the water: **reel very fast** — you have a lot of slack to remove before anything you do reaches the hook.
3. **Point the rod tip straight at the fish** and keep reeling into it.
4. When you feel its **weight and pressure on a completely straight, fully tensioned line**, lift the rod firmly.
5. **Do not set the hook.** Reel into it so the pressure is hard and direct and the rod is well bent.
6. Add **two or three firm jerks** to seat the hook in the corner of the mouth — **keeping the rod high and constant tension on the line** throughout.

Forget big hooksets entirely. If you reel down properly, the hook is placed where it should be and your drag is genuinely closed, the circle hook will rotate and lodge itself in exactly the right place. That is what a circle hook is designed to do, and it is why we insist on them with bait.

From there the fight is the same as section 11: drag closed to begin with, lowering as the fish comes closer to the boat, constant tension throughout, and never so loose that the fish can run freely with nothing holding it.



Airborne. This is where most fish are lost — and why you never reel through a jump.

ON THE WATER

11 The fight

KEEP TENSION ON THE LINE AT ALL TIMES

Everything else in this section is detail. This is the rule. **You will lose a lot of fish if you let the line go slack, even for a moment.**

Managing the drag

You started almost locked, for the hookset. From the moment the fish is on, the drag becomes something you adjust continuously against what is around you:

- **Lower it gradually** once you are connected, so the fish can run rather than tear the hook out.
- **Tighten it** when the fish heads for the edge of the forest or sunken timber. Stopping it there is worth the risk.
- **Lower it considerably** once the fish is boat-side, where a sudden run against a tight drag breaks leaders.

Push and pull

- **When the fish is pulling, hold your ground.** Let it pull.
- **When it stops, or swims toward you, lift the rod and reel down** on it, keeping tension the whole way.
- Some fish come in sluggish. If one is sitting right next to the boat, simply lift the rod, keep **light** tension, back the drag off so it can swim away, and let the guides row backwards to open space between you and the fish.

11

The run, *and the jumps*

The first run

The first run is the hardest and longest — expect **twenty to eighty metres** before the fish turns.

The jumps

Then it will go airborne, and that is where most fish come off. **Do not reel through a jump.** Keep the rod bent, keep steady pressure, let the fish do the moving.

Loosen the drag before the jump happens. A locked drag during a jump generates a lot of force in the opposite direction to the hook and can lever it straight out of the fish's mouth. But do not go too far the other way either — a drag backed right off relieves the pressure completely, and the hook needs some load on it to stay where it is.

You can usually see a jump coming: **the angle of the line rises steadily toward the surface.** Get ready. It is always a test and always a chance of losing the fish — an extraordinary aerial display, and a genuinely stressful few seconds.

What follows is a staged fight rather than one long grind: two or three secondary surges and a few more jumps, each weaker than the last. The angler who stays patient through those second winds is the one who wins.

FIVE TO TEN MINUTES — AND THE GUIDE'S ROLE

We want the fish at the shore **within five to ten minutes**, still strong. That is the entire reason for heavy tackle. A drawn-out "sporting" fight on light gear ends with an animal that goes down and never comes back up to breathe.

Your guide reads the fight beside you — calling corrections, rowing to keep tension and to hold the canoe off roots and snags, telling you when to give line and when to lean on the fish, and choosing the shallow water where the landing will happen.

ON THE WATER

12

The landing

Patience matters most in the last two minutes. A fish that looks finished boat-side almost always has several explosive runs left in it, and reaching for it early is how leaders get cut and hooks get thrown.

How it goes

1. The guide gets into the water and the canoe is tucked against the shore.
2. **Loosen your drag further.** Bring the fish in slowly.
3. The guide takes your line and draws the fish in by hand, reaching for the fins — **the only place an arapaima may be gripped.**
4. The fish will understand what is happening and bolt, often several times. Each time: **keep tension**, ease it back, and tighten the drag promptly if it is making for an obstacle, or simply running too far — in most circumstances it should not get more than about ten metres.
5. When the guide has it by the fins, wait for instructions. **Open the bail and put the rod in the canoe.** If the fish tears loose — which happens often — your rod is not going into the lagoon with it.
6. Get into the water. Come in *behind* the fish, as the guide directs: one arm under the belly, one under the tail.

THE ABSOLUTE RULES

No gaff. No beaching. No fish in the canoe. No hands in the gills — ever. Grip by the fins only, and keep as much of the fish in the water as possible throughout.

Landing is a two-person job. One person holds steady rod tension while the guide takes the fish. It is not a moment for a third pair of hands or for anyone climbing out of the boat unasked.

The landing is not the end of the fight. It is the beginning of the release — the two are one continuous process, and the clock is already running.

13 Handling and release

THE PREMISE, IN ONE LINE

The scales are bulletproof. The animal is not. An arapaima dies in minutes out of water. Handle it like a trout, not like a big catfish.

Despite its size, this fish is remarkably sensitive to stress and to poor handling. One that swims off looking perfectly healthy can still die hours later — the cumulative cost of a long fight, rough handling and too much air. That is **delayed mortality**, and it is invisible from the boat, which is exactly why the rules are absolute rather than discretionary.

The rules we fish by

- ☐ **Air exposure: a maximum of three lifts, about five seconds each.** Count them out loud. That is the whole photographic budget.
- ☐ **Support the full body horizontally, always.** Never hang a fish by the jaw or the gill plate. Guide on the head and belly, angler on the belly and tail.
- ☐ **The guide holds the head.** Partly because that is where the injuries happen when a fish thrashes, and partly so it can be dropped back under instantly the moment it signals it wants air.
- ☐ **Keep it right at the surface at all times**, so the fish can breathe. Not lifted out between photographs.

The release

When the guide says it is ready: come alongside, reach one arm over the fish and take the far **pectoral fin**, take the near pectoral with your other arm. Walk it slowly out, keeping it just under the surface. Lower it to about **50–60 cm** of depth. It should swim off on its own. **Do not hold it back when it wants to go.**

IF IT DOES NOT SWIM AWAY

Do not let go. Do not drop it on the bottom. Call your guide. A fish that will not leave needs more time being walked and re-oxygenated, and the guide will take over. The fish must swim away under its own power — that is the standard, and it is not negotiable.

Why we are this strict

Because we know roughly what it costs when we are not. The only published study of arapaima post-release survival followed 27 fish: 24 lived, three did not. Across eight seasons and several hundred captures, our own estimate of mortality is around 5 percent — but we treat that as a target to be proven, not a claim, and we are logging the entire 2026–27 season fish by fish to test it.

THIS IS NOT A THEORETICAL RISK

Across the Amazon there are operations running with far looser handling and release policies than these — and some with none at all. I have lost count of the arapaima I have found **floating dead a day or two after they were caught**.

Every rule in this section exists because someone has already watched what happens without it.

CONSERVATION

14 What your trip *actually* pays for

Where the species stands

CITES	Appendix II since 1975 — international trade restricted
Ecuador national red list	Vulnerable (Lista Roja de Peces Dulceacuícolas del Ecuador, 2019)
IUCN global list	Data Deficient — not enough range-wide data to assess

"Data Deficient" is not reassurance — it means nobody knows. The first census in the lower Napo basin counted 987 individuals; field work in early 2026 recorded relative abundance below that baseline, and a declining trend.

Why it collapsed

The meat is boneless and highly prized, the fish announces its own position every time it breathes, and in low water it concentrates in shallow, enclosed lagoons. That combination devastated populations through the twentieth century — severely enough that Brazil banned arapaima fishing outright from 1996 to 1999.

Why this model works

Where communities are given a real economic stake in living fish, the recovery is dramatic and repeatable. In the upper Essequibo, adult numbers went from 483 in 2001 to 4,591 by 2013. In the Juruá, protected lakes hold roughly thirty times the fish of unprotected ones — and the protection spills over: turtle poaching on protected beaches runs at about two percent against nearly total elsewhere.

The arithmetic, plainly

A dead adult arapaima is worth roughly **USD 330** to the fisher who sells it — once. A living one can be caught, photographed and released season after season, and what an angler pays is a multiple of that, every year, to the same community.

Even on the most pessimistic published mortality figure, releasing is worth **an order of magnitude more** to this community than selling. The argument does not depend on optimism — it survives its own worst case.

Who actually runs this

The project belongs to the **indigenous community we partner with**, and to **its Fishing Committee** — which sets the rules, oversees them and sanctions breaches. Community members are the monitors and the guides, the same people, because ten hours a day on the water reading breathing patterns is precisely the skill the census method requires.

Cast of the Wild is the tourism operator and technical partner. Internal regulations ban nets and commercial fishing outright and leave breeding waters untouched. Our trips fund the community's own control points, and the monitoring we do together decides how, when and where we fish.

Every fish you release is the argument. Make it a good one.

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