

A whale of a Tale: Spearfishing Decoys



Activity, Time and Materials

ACTIVITY:

As a group or one-on-one, discuss fishing and tell fishing stories from the participants' pasts. The participants, staff, and the participants' family members will paint their own folk art style spearfishing decoys and "swim" them in a "stock tank." The participants also will enjoy crackers and fish while telling fish stories.

TIME:

Two to three hours over three sessions (depending on the number of participants).

MATERIALS:

- Paint
- Markers
- Paper plates and small cups
- A selection of small and medium size paint brushes and Q-tips
- Spearfishing decoys already "swim" tested, primed, and painted white in advance by the artist, volunteers, or care facility staff (See note below.)
- Clear coat or waterproofing for fish decoys
- Jigging sticks about three feet long with fishing line (provided in advance by the artist, volunteers, or care facility staff)
- Examples of completed folk art fish decoys
- De-hooked fishing lures or photographs of commonly used lures
- "Swim" tank

- Crackers and fish (provided by the artist, volunteers, or care facility staff)
- Color pictures or photographs printed from the Internet of fish common to the region where the participants reside (These fish may include northern pike, walleye, perch, trout, bass, sunfish, crappie, bullheads, and catfish.)
- Color photocopies of the examples of spearfishing decoys illustrated in this activity plan
- The book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*

Note: Wooden blanks not primed or painted for spearfishing decoys can be obtained from spearfish decoy carvers like Rick and Connie Whittier, or from other people that can be found online. The wooden blanks also can be made in advance by local volunteer woodworkers or carvers following the design provided at the end of this activity plan by Rick and Connie.

"THREE PLAGUES" (LONELINESS, BOREDOM, HELPLESSNESS):

This activity is designed to increase social interaction between individuals within the care facility, as well as with the elder residents' family members and outside community, through the sharing of fishing stories and the painting of folk art decoys. Participants will enjoy giving the decoys as gifts or using them to show family

members and friends something they've created. The participants also will find they have much more in common with other residents when they share fishing stories, as nearly everyone has gone fishing or remembers family members and friends that have told them something about fishing. Loneliness and boredom is addressed by bringing people together on common ground by sharing common experiences. Even those who say they can't paint or haven't gone fishing will get involved when encouraged by staff or family members. The sense of helplessness is addressed by focusing on the folk art style of spearfish decoy painting, which does not have to rely on realism. The squiggly lines, whimsical designs, bold colors, and freedom from painting something "realistic-looking" allow those with hesitation and motor skills issues to create something beautiful. The artist, volunteers, and/or staff can assist with words of encouragement and by showing examples to the participants who say they can't paint.

ASSOCIATED MEDICAL STUDY:

"This study aimed to evaluate the effects of a folk recreation program on the symptoms of people with dementia. The program was tailored to the participants' interest[s] and was derived from their traditional culture background. A quasi-experimental study design was used. A total of 48 participants were assigned to an experimental or a control group. The experimental group received a 40 to 50-minute folk recreation intervention, which is mainly about art, music, and game, three times a week and for 16 weeks. The control group received routine care without special intervention. [Various examinations and indexes] . . . were used to estimate the cognitive

function, ability of daily living, and behavioral and psychological symptoms with dementia at baseline and week 16.

"For the experimental group, the mean scores . . . increased significantly from baseline to week 16 . . . for cognitive function and activity of daily living, and the mean score . . . decreased significantly . . . for behavioral and psychological symptoms. While, for the control group, the mean score [either decreased significantly or] . . . changed non-significantly. [The researchers conclude that] the folk recreation program has the potential to improve cognitive function, ability of daily living, and behavioral and psychological symptoms of the elders with dementia. The folk leisure activities, which embed in the participants' cultural background, will motivate their positive feelings and memories, can delay the progression of disease, and improve the symptoms." [Abstract]

--Li, D.M., and X.X. Li. "*The Effect of Folk Recreation Program in Improving Symptoms: A Study of Chinese Elder Dementia Patients.*" *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry.* Published electronically June 27, 2016. doi: 10.1002/gps.4543.

Cautionary Note: Consult with medical staff and participants with regard to allergies or other such adverse effects associated with smell and taste activities.

Cover photo: Spearfishing decoy created by Rick and Connie Whittier.

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Activity Plan

SESSION 1 (1 HOUR):

I. The person directing this activity should ask the participants to close their eyes and keep them closed. Then distribute plates of fish and crackers on the table. The fish may be any kind available; baked, pickled, grilled, or fried. Ask the participants to take a big whiff, and with their eyes still closed, ask them to describe what they smell. Ask the participants to open their eyes and invite them to snack on the fish. The person directing this activity plan should ask people to again close their eyes and take a big whiff and think about where the smell takes them in their minds. The person directing this activity plan should be the first to describe what image or memory he or she recalled after smelling the fish. The participants should then be asked to share or describe the images or recollections that came to their minds or what they thought about after smelling the fish.

Note: The sense of smell is a very powerful initiator of memory and feelings. People often recall images, events, or times based on smell. On the Great Plains, when turkey is baking, people often recall Thanksgiving memories or feelings. Hot apple cider can help to recall memories or feelings of the season of fall. Providing fish to see, taste, feel, and smell “primes the pump” for the sharing of fish-related stories and folklore.

2. The person directing this activity should explain to the participants that they will visit about fishing, fishing traditions, and folklore.

Explain that in another session they will also paint fish decoys that they can keep or give away as gifts, perhaps to a fisherman or fisherwoman in their families. The person leading the activity plan should be the first to share with the participants a memory of fishing. He or she should describe it thoroughly, and sit down with the group and be a part of the group when leading this “visit.”

The person leading the discussion should then ask a series of questions and read fish or fishing-related folklore entries from the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers*. This will help to spark recall, generate ideas, and initiate further discussion. Whenever possible, the person leading this discussion should share of themselves and be a part of the “visit.” Questions and folklore entries such as the following could perhaps be used:

- Who here fishes or has fished? Who taught you how to fish? Would anyone like to share a favorite experience while fishing? Do you have avid fishermen or fisherwomen in your family? Tell us about them and where they go to fish. Do you or do they fish in the summer, or do they ice fish?
- Follow or prime the discussion with selected readings of “fish stories,” such as folklore items 31-38 from *Sundogs and Sunflowers* (pages 239-242). After the readings, ask participants to share similar stories they may have heard.

3. The person directing this activity should then explain to the participants that there are different kinds of fish common to the region and that there are lots of beliefs and practices regarding the best ways to catch them. Questions and folklore entries such as the following could perhaps be used for the discussion:

- What kind of fish did you fish for? What did they look like with regard to color, size, and shape? (In advance, the person directing the activity plan should go online and print color images of fish common to the region where the participants reside. These fish may include northern pike, walleye, perch, trout, bass, sunfish, crappie, bullheads, and catfish. Show these images to the residents during this discussion. These images also should be made available and displayed on the participants' tables for visual reference during Session 2.)
- Do you know any tips or tricks to catch fish? If so, please explain them. What are the best lures to use and for what kind of fish? Describe what the lures look like. What are the best times and weather conditions to fish? Foster the discussion by reading and sharing folklore items 39-52 from *Sundogs and Sunflowers* (pages 242-245). (The person directing this activity plan should distribute de-hooked fishing lures or photographs of commonly used lures for the participants to see and feel. These de-hooked lures or photographs of lures should also be made available and displayed on the participants' tables for visual reference during Session 2.)

4. Conclude the session by explaining that the next part of this activity will be to actually paint a spearfishing decoy. With the

participants' input, set a date and time for that session.

SESSION 2 (1 HOUR):

I. The person directing this activity should recap what was discussed in Session 1, and explain that the participants will paint their own spearfishing decoys that they can keep or give away as a gift. Explain that spearfishing is a type of ice fishing in our region where people cut large rectangular holes in the ice, which are then covered by fish houses and are kept completely dark. The darkness allows any fish to be seen as it swims up in sight of the hole. Painted wooden fish decoys are placed down the hole and moved up and down with a jiggling stick, which causes the decoy to move in a circle to attract fish. When the fish comes into view, a large, heavy, forked spear is thrown into the water to impale the fish.

Further explain that the carving and painting of fish decoys is an old traditional folk art that continues to this day. Some fish decoys are carved very realistically. Others are carved very whimsically, which do not at all resemble the markings of an actual fish. You can in this way reassure the participants that they do not have to worry about how they paint their decoys. Whether they want to paint them realistically or whimsically, it is completely up to them. Show the participants photocopies of the folk art style of spearfishing decoys that are illustrated at the end of this activity plan. Describe the simple yet artistic designs used to create the folk art style of decoy.

2. Show and distribute the photocopies or photographs from Session 1 of fish common to the area. Then one by one describe each

fish—their colors, markings, and so on. Distribute de-hooked lures, such as various daredevils from Session 1, and describe them. Some might be red and white daredevils, others may have green polka dots, still others may be half one color and half another. Distribute photocopies of the spearfishing decoys by Rick and Connie Whittier and of the elder artists as illustrated in this activity plan. Explain that the participants can use these various examples to inspire the designs they may paint, if they need and want that inspiration. However, also explain that they may paint any designs they wish. Stress that there is no right or wrong in creating folk art style fish decoys. Any colors and any designs can be used to create realistic or completely unrealistic designs.

3. On a small white paper plate, give the participants a white decoy and encourage them in the painting of their own folk art decoy. Ask the participants to write their names on their plates. (The decoys should remain on the plates while the paint dries.) Make available for each participant various colors of paint, a selection of small and medium size paint brushes, markers, and Q-tips. Small cups with water should be made available to wash paint brushes between colors. Explain and demonstrate to the participants that Q-tips and other such objects can be used creatively to create dots and other designs in the painting process.

4. Family members of the elder residents should be invited in advance to participate in this activity with their loved ones. They can either make their own decoys, or assist their loved ones in making their own. The person directing the activity plan and volunteers should mingle amongst the participants, assisting wherever needed and

encouraging them. All the while, continue the themes of discussion from Session 1 to initiate conversation and visiting between the participants. Visiting about fish stories and fishing folklore will aid in the creativity of everyone involved.

5. After most of the participants are done painting, provide a snack of fish and crackers and encourage them to continue visiting. Set the decoys aside to dry on small paper plates with the participants' names on them.

6. Conclude the session by explaining that the decoys will be allowed to dry, upon which time a layer of clear coat or waterproofing will be applied so the participants can “swim” their decoys in Session 3. With the participants’ input, set a date and time for that session.

SESSION 3 (1 HOUR):

I. Make arrangements for a “swim” tank to be set up on the premises. This may be a big and fairly deep cattle water tank, swim tank, or other such large tub. Loan arrangements may be made with a local farm implement dealer or farmer, or with the local fire department. Fill the tank with water in advance. Have on hand three or four wooden sticks or dowels approximately three feet in length with fishing line attached. The spearfishing decoys created by the participants can be attached to the fishing line and placed in the water tank. By jiggling the wooden stick or dowel in an up and down and slightly to the side motion, the decoys will “swim” in a circle. This is a very enjoyable part of the activity plan, so please allow for enough time so that every participant who wants to can “swim” his or her decoy.

2. Again, provide refreshments as participants watch and “swim” their decoys.

OPTIONAL SUGGESTION:

- I. Make fish and fishing a theme for the day by having a “movie night” in the commons area of the care facility, where you can show films like *The Old Man and the Sea*, *Moby Dick*, *Big Fish*, *A River Runs Through It*, or *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen*.

AUTHOR • RICK WHITTIER:

Rick is an exceptional folk artist from Lidgerwood, North Dakota. He has been carving and painting spearfishing decoys since 2004. He has taught the tradition as a master through the North Dakota Council on the Arts’ *Folk and Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program*. He has competed in the National Fish Decoy Association’s carving competitions and has won over eighty awards. Spearfishing decoys helped to first initiate the American Folk Art Movement and have been recognized for doing so by the Smithsonian Art Institute, which continues to encourage Rick in this wonderful tradition. Spearfishing decoys are a functional art and can be enjoyed by almost everyone. Rick started carving and painting decoys as part of his recovery from open heart surgery and now does it as a full-time occupation. He also enjoys using his decoys for spearfishing, which helps to provide food for the supper table.

AUTHOR • CONNIE WHITTIER:

Connie has helped Rick in the researching of spearfishing

decoy history and the making of them since 2004. She takes care of the sales of the decoys and has recently been more and more involved in helping Rick with the making of them. She helps to sand and cut them out, burn the scales on them, and also with the cutting out of the fins. Connie also assists with the North Dakota Council on the Arts’ *Art for Life Program*, with which Rick has been involved.

AUTHOR • TROYD GEIST:

Troyd is the state folklorist with the North Dakota Council on the Arts who is charged with encouraging the preservation and continuation of folk and traditional arts, heritage, and culture. He holds a Master of Arts degree in Sociology/Anthropology from North Dakota State University, and has participated in and conducted projects involving the impact of folk art and folk traditions on personal health and well-being. Those efforts include traditional storytellers working with fetal alcohol research and prevention programs, Bell’s palsy as viewed and treated in traditional cultures, familial Alzheimer’s disease tracking using anthropological methods, and the use of culturally infused narrative and traditional music for guided imagery. He directed the original *Art for Life* pilot project in 2001-2003, which measured the effects of long-term folk arts and artist interaction on combating the negative impact of the “Three Plagues” (loneliness, boredom, and helplessness) that many residents in elder care facilities experience. Subsequently, he developed the *Art for Life Program*. With Dr. Timothy J. Kloberdanz, Troyd co-edited, co-compiled, and co-authored the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*.

(All images courtesy of Troyd Geist, North Dakota Council on the Arts.)

Examples of Spearfishing Decoys for Inspiration Created by Rick and Connie Whittier

Photocopies of the following decoys may be shown and distributed to help inspire participants to create their own designs.



Note the design consists of simple squiggly and straight lines of various colors.



Note the design consists of squiggly lines, straight lines, and dots.



Note the design consists of pyramid shapes and dots.



This decoy is painted with dots of various colors.

Examples of Spearfishing Decoys for Inspiration Created by Elders in the Art for Life Program

Photocopies of the following decoys may be shown and distributed to help inspire and reassure participants that they can create their own designs. These decoys were painted by people in an eldercare facility in Jamestown, North Dakota, as part of an *Art for Life Program* activity in 2013.



Spearfishing decoy painted with red and white stripes and dots by a woman in her nineties.



Decoy painted with a row of prairie roses, North Dakota's state flower.



Decoy painted green with accents of yellow and red.



Decoy brightly colored by an elder in a care facility in Jamestown, ND.

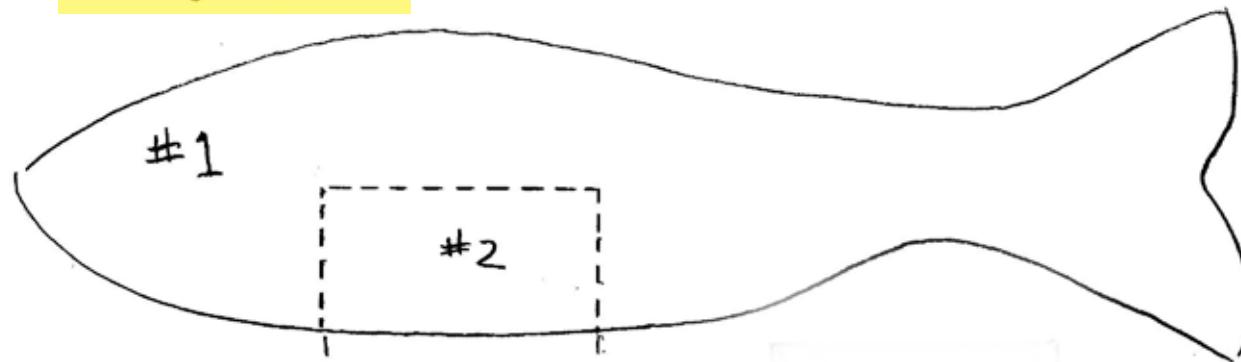
Basic Spearfishing Decoy Instructions

The following designs and instructions can be used by volunteer woodworkers or carvers to create wooden decoy blanks with metal fins. (However, the designs and instructions cannot be sold, and credit must be given to the artists, Rick and Connie Whittier, and the North Dakota Council on the Arts.) These blanks

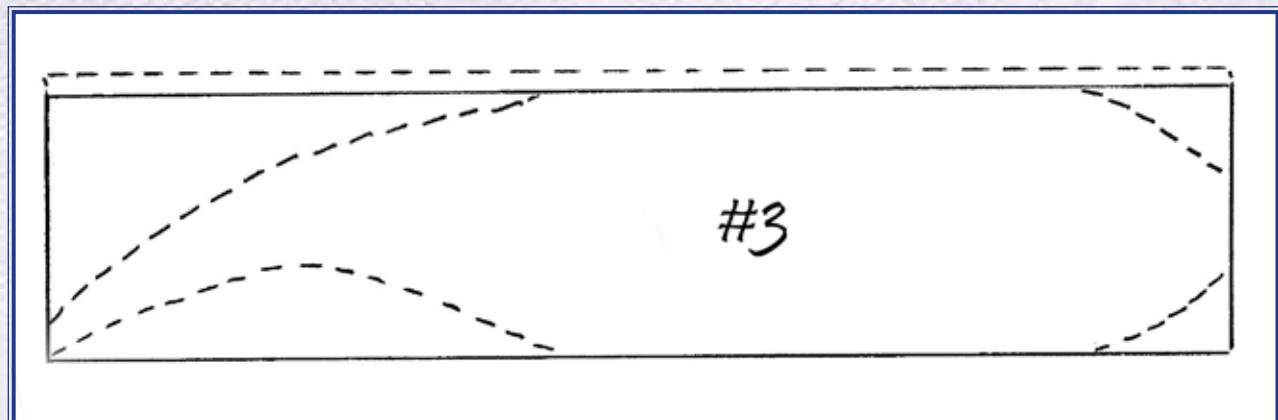
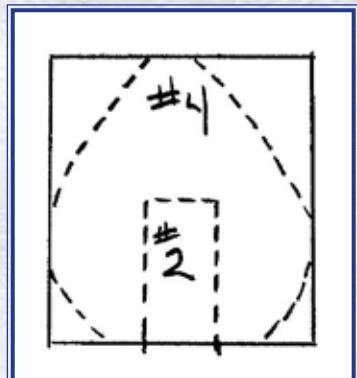
subsequently should be “swim” tested, primed, and painted white in advance by the artist directing the activity plan, volunteers, or care facility staff. The blanks then are ready to be painted by the people participating in the activity plan.

Basic spear fish decoy instructions
by
Rick Whittier
Whittier Decoys

All drawings are actual size



Using 1 1/2" white pine, cut out basic shape #1 with a bandsaw or scroll saw. Stand the decoy upright and remove 1/8" from one side, making it 1 3/8" wide. Next, mark and cut tail and head, as shown in #3. Once blank is cut out, shape decoy with a 1/2" sander band and Dremel. Do this to the entire decoy from head to tail, in order to achieve the profile shown in #4. Sand the decoy smooth with 60-grit paper. After sanding, use a 3/8" drill bit and drill several holes 3/4" deep on the bottom/belly of the fish as shown in Figure #2. Then connect the holes with continued drilling, making one cavity that follows #2 exactly. Be sure to keep the cavity in the center of the decoy body as shown in images above and below.



Using your 1/2" sander band and Dremel, cut the gill as shown in #5, approximately 1/8" deep and sanded with 60-grit paper. Using a metal cut-off wheel and your Dremel, cut #6 and #7 in from the sides to insert fins. This needs to be done on both sides, and cut at least 1/4" deep. Numbers 8 and 9 are done the same way, except that #8 is cut at the top and #9 from the bottom. Using the same cut-off wheel, sculpt the tail fin rays as shown in #10, cutting approximately 1/16" to 1/8" deep. Make many lines for the tail. Now fill the cavity on the bottom with molten lead. Next, cut out the fins (#6, 7, 8 and 9 below) and glue them in the cut slots with two-part epoxy glue. Remember to cut out two of each side fin for both #6 and #7. Insert the small eye hook, as shown in #11. For the paint, give two good coats of primer, then two coats of flat white. The decoy is now ready for the participants to paint however they wish.

