

The Use of Kites for Fishing—George Webster

1. Introduction

Regular readers will know my view that kites originated somewhere in, or near Indonesia when a leaf being used in a wind to blow the tackle out to the fish got tangled and turned into a kite. So it is no surprise to me that the greatest number of descriptions of 'kite fishing' are from that area (expanded to include Western Pacific islands). But kite fishing was practised in South Africa, at least until 1983 and is still done in the USA and New Zealand. There is even a history of kite fishing in the UK. – but none that I know of in the last 25 years – does anyone have a recent example?

Pierre Fabre (see bibliography) mentions that kite fishing was brought back to Europe in the 17th century – but I don't know of any evidence. The earliest American reference was given by *Ron Moulton* of paper barn doors being used in 1909.

2. Why Kite Fishing

Obviously fishermen use kites as available technology to improve their catch. Asian kite fishing typically uses the kite to take the bait away from the boat (shore fishing is unusual), which is an advantage with fish wary of boats and shadows. Depending on how high the kite is above the water, it is sometimes claimed that predator fish see the kite and are attracted by what they see as a bird hovering before attacking small fish. The kite may also be used to skip the lure along the surface of the water – which attracts fish. Before western lines were available local lines floated which made them more likely to scare fish and gave an extra reason for using a kite to drop the bait into the water. Those Indonesian and Pacific societies had technical problems in making small hooks; much fishing today is by net or fish trap.

It will probably soon be clear to anyone who knows much about fishing that I don't; the previous paragraph is looking at south east Asian kite fishing. I've used the terms bait and lure interchangeably – in the home of kite fishing hooks and bait are not used in the most famous form of fishing, which is for garfish (or needlefish). These are elusive predators which come to the surface from quite deep (100m) water. In 'Europe' according to *Fabre* their bones are bright blue; British specimens have green bones and used to be called mackerel

runners in my youth. Eastern types are prized to eat, all are long and narrow with lines of backward facing teeth in long mouths.

In Micronesia the lure was a mass of spider's webs in which the fish's jaws got tangled. In Indonesia there is another method where the lure is a loop with a small fish attached. When the fish takes the bait the strike pulls the loop around those jaws.

Western kite fishing also uses the kite's ability to get the bait away from a boat's shadow. Kite fishing is also used in beach-casting where bait can be deposited beyond the breakers and the range of a casting rod. Kites can be used to hold a surface bait in position against a current, move a bait through the water or simply be positioned above a weighted bait.

Using kite fishing to avoid the rocks when fishing from a lighthouse is a British technique – no longer used as all our lights are now automatic.

3. Types of kite

Given our major interest; what sort of kites are used? Clearly kites should be inexpensive – professional fishermen are often poor – and anyway the kite has to be expendable compared to the fish. Most kites used nowadays in Asia have plastic covers – even where 20 years ago leaf kites prevailed. In 10 years time no doubt all will be made in China.

The most basic form of leaf kite is shown in Illustration 1. Very often the leaf, which will be pressed as it dries, will have a cross spar and perhaps even a spine of something like split bamboo simply threaded through. Even this

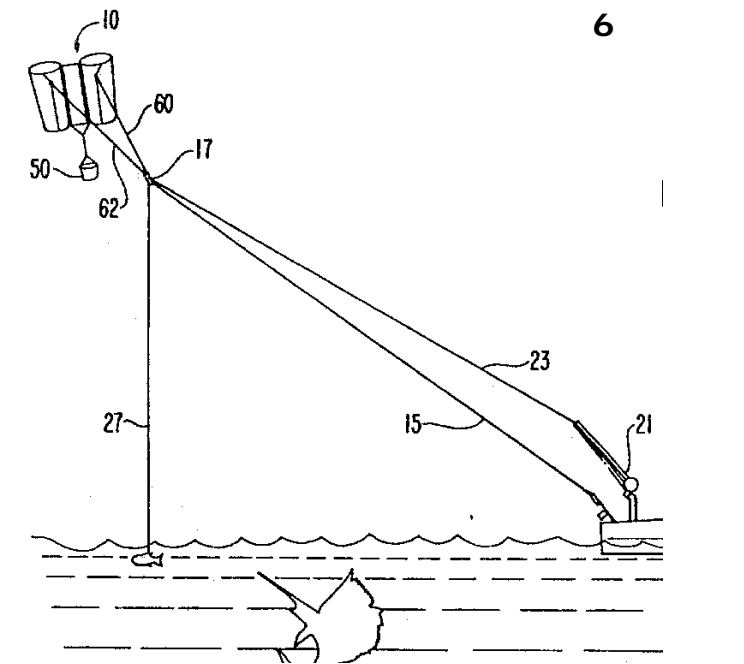
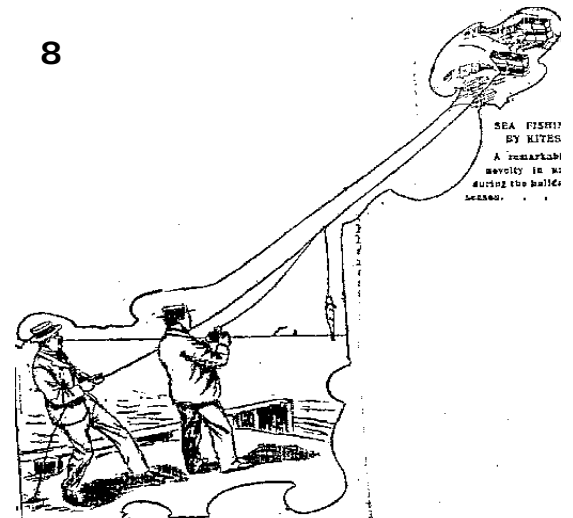
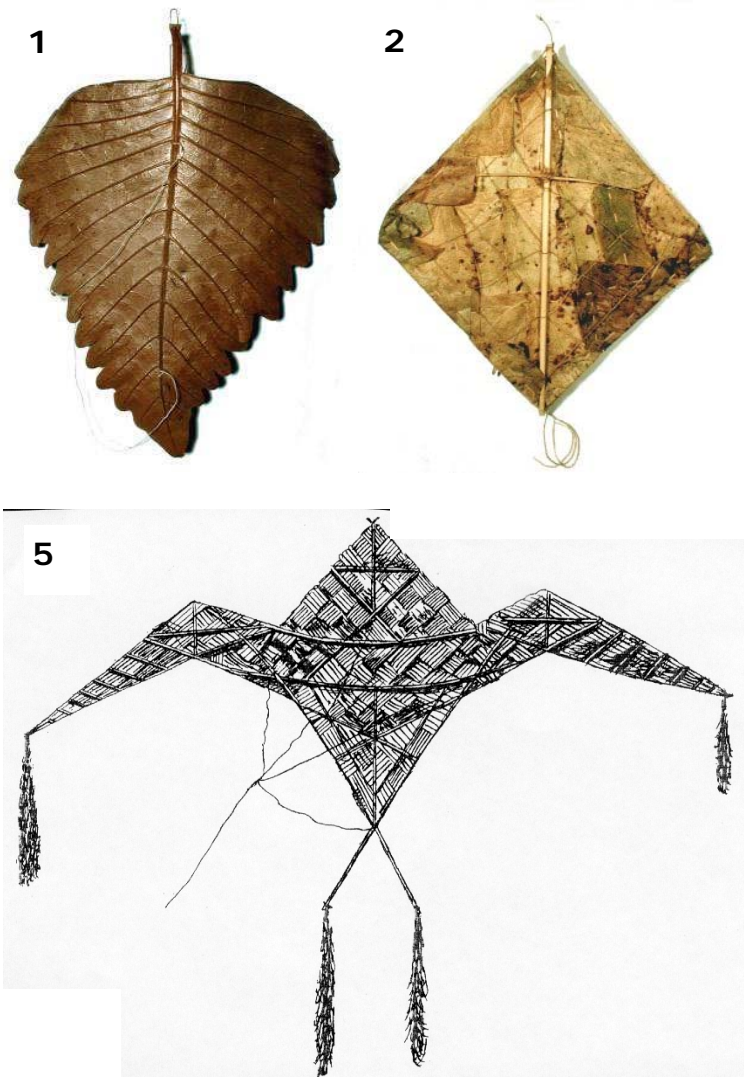


3 simple kite can have its bridle adjusted for wind speed and to allow it to fly 'off' the wind direction. But leaf kites can be much more complicated although fishing



4 kites are small. *Tal Streeter* reports a leaf kite rather like Illustration 2 but 7' tall with a hummer – for

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SEA FISHING BY KITES.
The Remarkable Invention of an Enthusiastic Angler.

The kite has generally been considered an admirable means of pleasure, but an enthusiastic sea-angler during his recent vacation devised a method of turning it to more profitable account in connection with his sport.

To the wire controlling the kite, which is of the ordinary box type, is attached a number of fishing-lines. They pass over small pulleys or through small eye-holes fixed to the kite wire. The kite is flown in the usual manner, and in ascending carries the fishing-lines out to sea. The angler allows the lines to run out to the requisite length. The wire controlling the kite runs off a reel fixed to the ground, and can be checked whenever required.

When a fish has been hooked the line is wound upon the winch until it has been raised somewhat, and the kite is simultaneously wound in.

The operation is very simple and can be performed expeditiously if an assistant is employed to wind in the kite at the same time.

The most salient characteristic of the device is that any number of fishing-lines may be attached to the kite wire. To ascertain if his bait is still intact on the hook, the angler simply winds in the winch connected to that particular fishing-line until it is above the water. If the bait is still there, the winch has only to be released and the hook falls back into the sea.

Of course, the kite can only be requisitioned when the wind is blowing in the suitable direction. Also it cannot be employed for fresh-water angling, as the movements of the kite in the air would disturb the floats and frighten the fish.

The new method of fishing will particularly recommend itself to those who prefer to remain comfortably situated on dry land. At places where there are no piers, kite fishing might easily be made popular.

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ceremonial purposes. The stamps in illustrations 3 and 4 (thanks to Michael Alvares for his collection) show the very different fishing kites used in the east of our area. The use of whole leaves, palm fronds, grasses etc are a reminder that quite complex kites (Illustration 5) are known – though this example would be for ceremonial/religious purposes.

Various types of kite are used in the West. *Stormy Weathers* advocated a 'Bigmouth Sled'; basically the 2 stick design with the spars tapering from 20" apart to 15" on a 3' kite. In South Africa *Turton* used della portas with 3' diagonals and long tails. The bridle was 3 point, same length from each top corner and the centre intersection. It was easy to adjust such a kite to fly 'off' the wind.

I have a New Zealand 6' delta sold for fishing – here the kite flies 'off' by attaching a plastic bag on a short line from one of the fittings where the spreader joins with the leading edge spar.

In the USA at least one kite was patented for kite fishing – by Richard Gerstein in 1991. Illustration 6 shows the sled kite and the fishing arrangement. The claimed advantage of the design was its ability to fly stably in gusty winds and also over a wide wind range. Has anybody seen one?

4. Line Arrangements

There are, I think, three main methods:

1) Single line

The kite line becomes the bridle, which then passes down the kite to be the tail at the end of which is the bait/lure in the water. This is used in Indonesia, often with a 'rod' in the form of a pole with a ring at the tip through which the line passes. The rod helps to get the kite up into the wind and keeps it out of the water when pulling in. This rig is designed to dance the lure on the surface. The kite is a plastic Malay of about 8" x 8" – see *Tal Streeter*. The lowest third of the cover may be cut away for strong wind use.

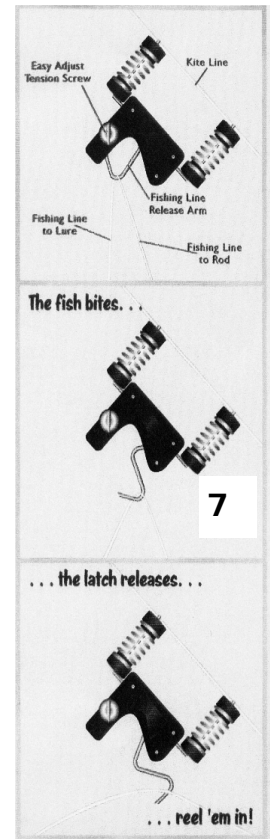
2) Single line with a fishing line fixed to it

This is well described by *Turton*. A low angle is best and bottom, fly or trolling is possible. *Stormy Weathers* used a plastic container part filled with water as a float, which would also

stop the bait being lifted. *Turton's* system allows the line to be retrieved using reel/rod but the kite line has to be detached, often at the critical point of landing the fish.

3) The third system has two lines – one fishing, one kite (see Illustration 6).

The fishing line may be attached to the kite line by a clothes peg (*Stormy Weathers*) or a purpose-made fitting. Illustration 7 shows a purpose made fitting from a Kite Fishing Package purchased this year from Kitty Hawk Kites.



5. British Kite Fishing

I know of two examples:

Illustration 8 is an extract from the Daily Mail of Saturday September 2nd 1901. Three things strike me:

- the use of a short train of what looks like 'Blue Hill' Hargrave boxes which must have been cutting edge kiting at that time
- flying with wire
- the system was straightforward 'killing fish' i.e. get a bite, pull it up, haul it in.

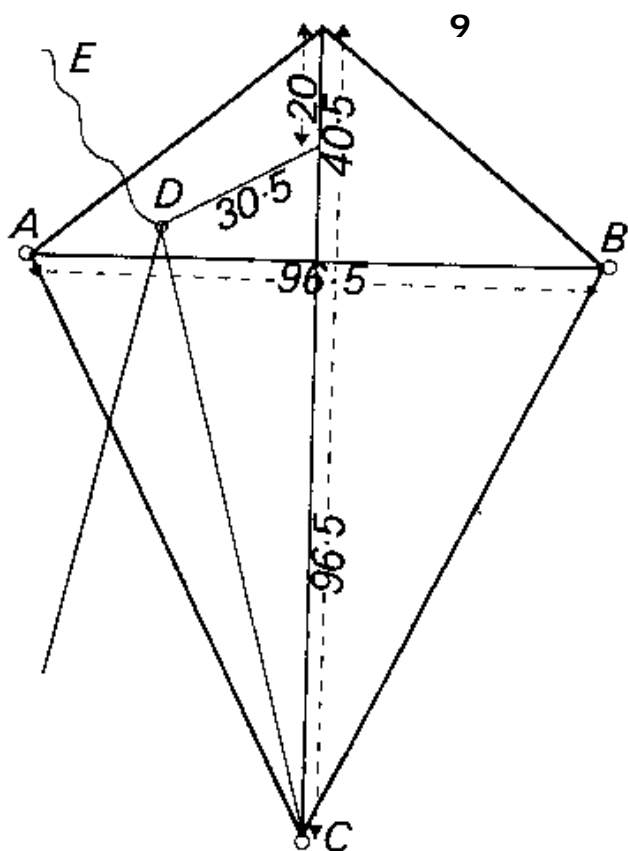
Illustration 9 is of the kite used by *Bill Trebilcock*, Principal Keeper of the Eddystone Light, to catch fish in 1978.

He wrote that kite fishing had been practised for 'coming on 150 years', having developed from using pig's bladders as balloons. Made from light canvas, canes and 5mm line, the kite shown was used in up to force 6 when it was capable of ferrying a parcel and rig weighing 10 kg from a boat, 40m to the top of the tower.

The 'stray line' marked E was attached to A or B depending on which side of the tower the kite was required to fly. With the length of E adjusted to give the kite the required buoyancy

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(i.e. flying level) the kite could be flown 5-10m



above the sea, 50-100m out. This was done by attaching weights to the 30m tail which ended with the baited hook.

Striking after a bite caused the kite, and fish, to rise. The main problem was the fish banging on the tower on its way up but (to quote) "about 7 out of 10 stay for supper". The article has a photo of Bill and a fish.

6. Bibliography – in date order

1913 'Kite Fishing' by H. Balfour. In 'Essays and Studies presented to William Ridgway' Cambridge University Press 1913.
Everyone seems to refer to this. It includes a reference to the 1901 article – Illustration 8

1967 'Kites an historical survey' by C Hart. Chapter 3 – has some drawings of kites

1971 'Kites' by Wyatt Brumitt
Mentions \$50 kits sold in Florida for

catching sail fish

1976 'Pelham'. Outlines the 'clothes peg' rig and speculates about using 2 line kites for trolling (?ever done)

1977 'The Big Mouth and Pelican Sleds' Stormy Weathers Systems, kites and an example.
'1 Breadfruit leaf etc etc' by W.J. Baldwin
How a simple leaf kite was used to fish Both in Kitelines Fall 1977

1978 'Kites' by Ron Moulton. Good illustrations of several line systems
'A Fisherman's Tale' by Bill Trebilcock
European Kiteflier Spring 1978

1983 'Heavyweight Kite Fishing South African Style' by A.R. Turton. Kitelines Summer/Fall 1983. Dramatic account of a night's fishing with lightsticks hanging below the kites. Much know-how. Kite fishing with a national association produced e.g. a 791 kg great white shark and a 42kg marlin

1996 'Kite Fishing Indonesian Style' by E. Ohashi. Kitelines Summer 1996
Brief but good kite illustrations

1998 'Fish' n Kites' by Pierre Fabre
Kite Passion February 1998
Probably the best 'general' article

2002 'The Philosopher's Kite by Tal Streeter
Wonderful description of leaf kites and of a group of kitefliers travelling to try kite fishing.

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If you are interested in kite fishing as an activity then the following resource may be of interest.

www.kitefishing.co.uk has a booklet Introduction to Kite Fishing for sale as an e-book. The web site also contains a FAQ and links to other kite fishing sites. Three of the links are to specific kite fishing sites—none in the UK—who sell both the kites and kite rigs. Interestingly the kite that seems most popular is the one in the patent—or at least a derivative of that kite.