

Q.A.N.D.A.

‘I Identify as an Angler’: Meet Erica Nelson, a Female, Indigenous Fly Fishing Guide

She hooks tree branches, slips on rocks, and shines a light on the topics nobody talks about in her sport.

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Erica Nelson casts her fly in the Taylor River in Almont, Colo. Ryan Duclos

“I admit it,” says Erica Nelson, one of just two female indigenous fly fishing guides in Colorado. “I’m awkward.” Raised in Kirtland, New Mexico by Diné parents (Diné being the Navajo word for “the people”), Ms. Nelson’s upbringing was far from traditional Diné – the result of indoctrination of her ancestors by missionaries. “The church we attended, often several times per week, was non-denominational Christian,” she says. “There isn’t a direct path to reconnect with our culture.”

Her childhood didn’t include much fishing either: just two outings with her father. “I hated it,” she says. Still, learning as an adult, she found fly fishing inspiring and the necessary skills and knowledge – like entomology, rigging and casting techniques, equipment maintenance and care, and the multitude of fish species – infinite. During the pandemic, Ms. Nelson began hosting a podcast to cover the less celebrated sides of fly fishing (like untangling hopeless

snarls) along with more difficult and potentially uncomfortable topics like underrepresented demographics and inequities in the sport.

"It wasn't really a welcoming space initially," says Ms. Nelson of fly fishing. Staff at shops weren't forthcoming with information, and photos in gear catalogs were mostly white men. She felt like an outsider in a sport she was coming to love. "Nobody looked like me," she says. Appropriately, she called her podcast the Awkward Angler.

A diversity and inclusivity consultant, she is the co-founder of REAL Consulting ("REAL" stands for Reconcile, Evolve, Advance, Lead). As she eventually began to connect with other anglers with marginalized identities, she partnered with the advocacy organization Brown Folks Fishing to develop an initiative called Angling for All. Anglers, outfitters, and organizations who sign the Angling for All pledge commit to examining and challenging ways in which the sport excludes participation based on race, gender identity, or sexual orientation.

Ms. Nelson makes no attempt to separate politics, socio-economics, gender, and race from fishing. "I identify as an angler," she says. "And I'm interested in people whose stories aren't being told."

It's finally spring. What did you do all winter?

I fly fished. For example, on New Year's Day there was a high of 8 degrees Fahrenheit, and Colorado had just received about 100 inches of snow. I wore fleece lined pants, thick ski socks, fleece layers, waders, boots, and a Gore-Tex outer jacket. We climbed through snow, sometimes post-holing up to our waists. At the river, we fished with 5-weight fly fishing rods, and used small nymph flies like pheasant tails and zebra midges. Fish were rising, and all the pain and numbness from the cold went away. We were zoned in on the area and caught some fish. Later, as the sun went down, the temperature dropped and our lines kept freezing and it was too cold to replace any flies. When we couldn't feel our toes anymore we retraced our tracks back to the car to pop a bottle of champagne.

Who taught you fly fishing?

I learned by watching YouTube videos. And from Tinder. Seriously, flipping through profiles on Tinder, I noticed lots of guys had pictures of themselves holding fish. So I reached out and started asking questions.

I lived in Wyoming so anyone I'd meet online would be three hours away. Some men, many of them fishing guides, were open to answering questions (and I had lots). After establishing some trust, I'd visit for a fishing weekend where I learned basic casting, insect hatch patterns, rigging techniques, and equipment maintenance. That first fish is so many things: it's excitement, accomplishment, reinforcement. They say the tug is the drug. It's like gambling; you just want more.

Your podcast is called the Awkward Angler. Are you awkward?

Yes! When I started fishing, I had these picturesque visions of big, long, dramatic casts like Brad Pitt in *A River Runs Through It*. What I experienced instead was doing a back cast and hooking

my fly in overhanging tree branches behind me. I fell on slippery rocks. It turned into a lot of patience, frustration, and untangling. I caught more trees than fish. I didn't know anything about how to handle a fish or properly remove a hook. It's probably good I didn't catch anything at first.

On top of this, I'd walk into a fly shop and encounter no one like me. I started the Instagram account Awkward Angler to keep asking for advice, but also to connect with others internationally and across the US. Who else out there is fishing and looks and thinks like me? Is there anyone who is not a cisgender, white male? I ended up meeting women of color, non-binary anglers, transgendered anglers, anglers who are neuro-divergent or with different physical abilities.

Is there more diversity across the sport now than when you started?

When I started fishing in 2016 there may have been brown people fly fishing, but I didn't know any, and I never saw them. In the entire state of Colorado there were no women of color guiding. Now there are a woman from outside Colorado Springs and me.

In the wake of George Floyd's murder, people have had the realization that racism does happen in this country, and it trickles down to fly fishing. Since the start of the pandemic, lots of new people tried fly fishing for the first time, and we started to see a shift in demographics. I've had people with marginalized identities such as LGBTQ+, women, women of color, or unlabeled folks reach out to connect and to express appreciation that I'm not afraid to speak up for us and our voices. And they're booking as clients, so I'm taking them out and introducing them to fly fishing.

What is the Angling for All pledge?

The Angling for All pledge involves a training curriculum in diversity, equity, and inclusion and making a commitment to address racism and inequality in fishing and its industry.

In 2019, Orvis, the oldest fly fishing outfitter, invited some ambassadors from Brown Folks Fishing to its annual retreat in Missoula, Montana. We talked to their executive leadership team including their president Simon Perkins. We were candid about not being feeling included or welcomed. At first they just listened. I think many companies want to take immediate action and quickly fix any wrongs with bullet lists and action items without pausing to do the more difficult internal work or reflection. Creating authentic relationships actually takes thought and time.

Orvis was the first outfitter to sign the Angling for All pledge. Other organizations include Patagonia and the nonprofits Casting for Recovery and California Trout. Orvis reviewed their internal culture, catalogs, social media, and marketing materials to explore how they might be contributing to the lack of representation in the industry. And I do a weekly show with angler, teacher, and journalist Tom Rosenbauer who has been connected with Orvis for decades. We call it *Awkward and Clueless*.

You have recently been attempting to connect with your Diné heritage and culture. How do you do this?

It's difficult. There aren't many resources to help me learn. Indigenous histories are largely oral, and many in my family have trouble talking about our culture because they suffered emotional trauma through assimilation. We went to church, and I participated in sports and music. We celebrated Easter, Christmas, and Thanksgiving.

I have been reconnecting and reclaiming what it means to be indigenous. I am choosing which holidays to recognize; for example, I recognize a National Day of Mourning in lieu of Thanksgiving. I celebrate October 1, the Navajo New Year and the fourth Monday of April, Navajo Nation Sovereignty Day – the day the Navajo Nation gained its independence from the United States.

Really the process is relearning everything we were taught in school. It's learning about my own people: things like the Long Walk of 1864, when we were forcibly removed from our land (a form of genocide), which wasn't taught. There are more and more people like me who are yearning to learn and connect. But our elders are dying and our culture with them.

Do you divulge your secret fishing spots?

I never want to be a gatekeeper for someone entering the sport, so I'm happy to share places that are easy to access or places where I've caught some fish. However, if we're talking about maximizing this information to thirty thousand followers, it bears some consideration in terms of how it would fit with a place's holding capacity or conservation efforts.

I did a whole podcast on geotagging and the moral issues around conservation, the environment, and social media. In Diné culture, there's a concept called living in *Hohzo*, a philosophy of striving for a balance that encompasses beauty, order, and harmony. I try to have a reciprocal relationship with fly fishing. I see a lot of people in the sport and industry wanting to take. When I'm on the water, I want to show up as my full self and maybe give back too. I want that for everyone.



Erica Nelson holding a brown trout in the Frying Pan River in Basalt, Colo. Ryan Duclos