

Recycling Soft Plastics



by Chris Gorsuch

Webster's dictionary defines the word recycle as a resource made ready for reuse. As bass anglers, one could say that recycling is par for the course. Just by practicing catch and release, we are recycling bass for the next angler. Tackle shops are set up with bins for recycling old fishing line and some of us even recycle old fishing gear on eBay. In a day and age where we recycle just about everything; aluminum cans, plastic bottles, newspapers, plastic shopping bags and glass - - why should recycling used soft plastic baits be any different?

A few years ago, a buddy looked at all the discarded soft plastic baits lying on the floor of my boat and asked if he could have them. Most were ripped, torn and faded, some were just pieces. I chuckled and said; "why would anyone want those?" See my partner was melting these old baits down, adding some new plastic and making his own lures. I didn't give it any thought until later that winter when we out on the Delaware River fishing for smallmouth bass. After landing a few bass I asked him what he was throwing. It was a custom soft plastic he was pouring with his



recycled lures. I was never one to argue with results and after that day, I began recycling and pouring my own soft plastics.

The process is really quite simple. When the old baits are heated they turn into a thick liquid which can be mixed with a small portion of new plastic to add the correct consistency. Coloring dye can be mixed in to create the desired tones and then poured into plastic molds that are very inexpensive. When looking at my personal collection of soft plastics I noticed something about my color choices. The majority of my baits could be defined as either green or brown. Packaged baits in colors such as, watermelon, green pumpkin, melon seed and a shade cleverly defined as road-kill-camo accounted for 90% of my late autumn and winter baits. Oddly enough, when mixed together, it pretty much becomes a brown that fits right into those shades so little if any color is required. Another option is to

separate the used soft plastics into similar colors, the various greens with the greens and the browns with the browns. In doing this, there is almost no need for adding any color agents.

Getting started is a snap and the up front costs are minimal. A soft plastic mold or two, a pint of liquid plastic and a few ounces of heat stabilizer is all you need. The old recycled soft plastic baits will serve as 99% of your base material. The liquid plastic can be used to lighten the shade so only a small amount is required. The heat stabilizer helps keep the plastic from scorching when over heated and also helps keep colors from fading over time. A glass Pyrex measuring cup and a microwave is one of the easiest ways to melt the baits. A stove top also works, but for me, finding an inexpensive or used microwave and using it in the garage or workshop helps keep my wife happy. A happy wife makes for a happy angler.

Online tackle-craft retailers such as Lure Craft, Barlow's Tackle and Janns Netcraft have a large selection of soft plastic lure molds and all the supplies you will need to get started. In fact there are hundreds of molds to choose from under \$10 each. Worms, grubs, insects, minnows and various pork-trailer style baits just to name a few.

With the mold selected and supplies in hand. Place about a half cup of used soft plastic baits into the Pyrex measuring cup and place in the microwave for 2 to 2.5 minutes. The key here is not to over heat the material and each brand of microwave will require different spans of time. With a metal spoon stir the material, check the color and consistency. Add a little stabilizer and if required a tablespoon full of liquid plastic. Stir and place back into the microwave for another 60 seconds and repeat until the plastic is ready to pour. The more material, the longer it will take to heat. When it has about the consistency of light pancake batter, slowly fill the cavities of the



mold. Let the mold cool for 1.5 to 2 minutes and flip onto a flat clean surface. A tin cookie sheet works great as it allows the plastic to cool faster. Lightly flexing the mold will help separate the bait from the mold. Reheat the plastic mix and repeat the process. It is that simple. Practice makes perfect and I've noticed that the heat can be managed without the stabilizer by heating and stirring the plastic in shorter intervals. Key here is to take your time, work with smaller amounts of material and shorter heating times until you get a feel for how quickly your microwave heats the material.

Adding color, scent attractants and extra metal flake can be done to further enhance custom poured baits. These steps are done after the plastic is heated; stir completely to distribute the color tints and metal fleck. The advice here is to add color and metal flake slowly as a little goes a long way. Some

scents are also very potent, so take it slow when adding them. The whole process is rather simple and only takes a few pours to get the results desired.

Additives and new plastic material can be mixed in to improve how soft or hard the finished baits are. When the baits are first removed from the mold, they are very soft. The recommendation here is to let the baits cool before choosing to add hardener to the mixture. Another factor is the recycled material you start with as some soft plastics are softer than others.

For sinking or dead-stick type worms, salt and even sand can be added to the mixture for additional weight. This is trial and error and it just takes a amount to control the fall rate. This is especially popular for worm and sinking fluke baits. For baits that will use a weighted jig-head, this step can be skipped and in many of these cases, lighter is better.



Being soft themselves, it is important to take precautions to protect the molds from heat damage. Do not fill the mold more than 5 or 6 times before allowing the mold to cool down. They are not meant for mass production, these flexible molds are delicate and will damage if over heated. Proper care and handling will allow them to last a good long time.

Finished baits can be rigged to painted jigs and dressed with silicon skirt material. I first saw this several years ago when an angler on the named Joe tied a few strands of silicon to his jig heads. These Spring Jigs were fitted with curl and paddle style grubs and fished slowly to mimic crayfish in clod water. A local craze for early Spring smallmouth has been with a paddle tail worm known best as an Erie Darter. That is

the mold I chose for this article. A good many bass from New York, Pennsylvania Ohio and New Jersey have fallen to this jig and grub combination.

The whole process is very inexpensive as the end cost is only a few pennies per bait. There are hundreds of molds to choose from to fit most any need. Worms, grubs, minnow baits, trailers and much more. Beyond the value of saving money on new baits, carelessly discarding old baits can be harmful to fish as they have difficulty digesting or passing these baits once swallowed. Recycling is an effective way to reuse and protect the resource.

Always remember, *Resource First*. Practice catch and release.