

Chapter 10

The Fluorocarbon Advantage

Learn how fluorocarbon leaders *really can* improve your catch!



When it comes to wrestling giant grouper off the reefs and wrecks of Florida and the Bahamas, the author swears by fluorocarbon, which is less visible and more durable than nylon mono.

Do fluorocarbon leaders really catch more fish? For many of today's fishermen the answer is a resounding "yes!" Whether it's live-lining for striped bass, chunking for tuna or trolling for big game, those who use the highly touted stuff swear by its effectiveness — myself included.

Originally perceived as an "offshore" line because of its roots in the commercial tuna fishery, fluorocarbon has proven itself equally valuable for coaxing more strikes from inshore game fish. Thus, the leader material has experienced a huge surge in popularity. In fact, many inshore anglers won't use anything except fluorocarbon for their leaders, regardless of whether they're fishing lures or live bait. It's also fast becoming the leader of choice for serious bottom fishermen who target groupers, snappers, amberjack and even tautog.

Experienced fishermen understand the advantages of fluorocarbon leaders and willingly shell out the extra money for it. However, others remain unconvinced over the exact benefits of this low-visibility material, including whether or not it offers an advantage in murky water or when trolling surface baits and lures.

Numerous Benefits

As a leader material, pure fluorocarbon offers several advantages over nylon monofilament.

Manufactured from extruded polyvinylidene fluoride, fluorocarbon's number-one selling point is that its refractive index — the degree to which light bends, or refracts, as it passes through a substance — is very similar to that of water. That makes it more difficult for fish to see. For example, some fluorocarbon formulas have a refractive index as low as 1.42, with water registering around 1.3. By

CHAPTER 10



comparison, the refractive index of nylon monofilament is around 1.52.

Also, depending upon the brand, fluorocarbon has a diameter that's generally smaller than that of nylon mono of the same breaking strength, which makes it less noticeable. In addition to low visibility, fluorocarbon has very little stretch and a hard, smooth finish that is extremely abra-

sion resistant. Less stretch means more sensitivity, which allows you to detect subtle bites and "feel" the performance of baits or lures, including any contact they make with structure or the bottom. Low stretch also promotes solid hook-sets. And fluorocarbon's tough finish stands up better to the abuse of structure and the raspy jaws and scales of certain game fish.

Fluorocarbon also contains more material than mono and is non-porous. Since it's denser than water, it sinks. And since it doesn't absorb water, it maintains its rated breaking strength wet or dry. By comparison, a nylon monofilament absorbs water and can lose as much as 15 percent of its rated breaking strength when saturated.

Fluoro Leaders Vs. Line

Fluorocarbon fishing lines are generally less expensive than the pure leader material, and are often purchased by price-conscious anglers seeking to use them to make leaders. However, the two have very different properties.

Fluorocarbon fishing lines are

Mutton snapper are one of the wariest species that swims, which is why anglers who pursue them are more than willing to pony up a few extra bucks for fluorocarbon leader material.

based on a different formula than fluorocarbon leaders that makes them conducive for use on reels. Hence, they are suppler and less prone to memory, characteristics similar to a nylon monofilament.

A disadvantage of pure fluorocarbon is its stiffness and memory, which make it impractical to use as a primary fishing line. It simply won't handle or cast as well as a nylon monofilament or fluorocarbon fishing line. On the other hand, because fluorocarbon fishing lines are softer and more flexible than pure-fluorocarbon leader material, they're not as durable.

I have been a staunch believer in fluorocarbon leaders for a number of years, although initially I was a bit skeptical as to how much of an advan-



Tuna chunkers are well aware of their quarry's keen eyesight, so they look to fluorocarbon to give them an advantage.

tage they would offer. That was before I put them to the test on a trip to the Bahamas six years ago. While fishing for mutton snapper, a notoriously keen-eyed bottom fish, a friend and I fished identical outfits spooled with identical line of the same breaking strength. We used identical hooks and weights, as well as leaders of the same length and strength. The only difference was that he used a fluorocarbon leader while I went with nylon monofilament. The results? My friend boated roughly three fish for every one I landed!

Later that afternoon we switched rods and the action followed the fluorocarbon. We kept up our little experiment the following day, and over the next four consecutive trips to Bimini. The results were convincing. When the bite wasn't red hot, the fluorocarbon leaders made all the difference in the world. Furthermore, there was a marked difference in abrasion resistance. The fluoro material held

up much better than the nylon mono when dragged across the reef by a big snapper or grouper. Even though some of the leaders came back heavily damaged, I'm convinced that the fish were less able to break us off because of the material's hard finish and durability.

After the Bimini experiments I switched to fluorocarbon for just about all my fishing. Over the years I've seen a big difference when drifting live baits for sailfish, bottom fishing for grouper, chunking for tuna, and casting to wary dolphin, snook and tarpon. In some cases I've had to scale down to a lighter leader to get more bites, yet have still been able to land fish thanks to the material's impressive abrasion resistance.

Worth the Price

Given its low-vis advantage, is fluorocarbon still worth its higher price when fishing in cloudy water or

trolling surface baits? Captain Barry Gibson, who runs striped bass charters from Maine's Boothbay Harbor when he's not editing SWS, reports that he has been using fluorocarbon for over four years, and that it is "the best leader material to date."

"In the crystal-clear waters along our coast, fluorocarbon definitely works," Gibson says. "I'm not convinced its low-visibility is as big an issue in the murky inshore rivers, yet the savings of not using it here aren't enough to make me switch back to nylon monofilament. Fluorocarbon is more abrasion-resistant, too. When I'm guiding, I need every edge I can get. Conventional wisdom tells me that if fluorocarbon leaders outperform nylon mono, I should be using them."

Like Gibson, I continue using fluorocarbon in murky water, when night fishing, and when trolling. While its low-vis properties may not come into play in these situations, I still seek the extra protection provided by its tough finish. I also favor its relatively small diameter, which could improve the action of live baits and lures.

Offshore Observations

When he's not guiding clients to a variety of light-tackle species off Palm Beach, Florida, during the winter and spring, Captain Greg Bogdan pursues tuna and billfish from Ocean City, Maryland, to Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Regardless of whether he's chunking or trolling, Bogdan prefers fluorocarbon as his leader material of choice.

As for fluorocarbon making a differ-

CHAPTER 10



The need for low visibility fluorocarbon in cloudy water is often questioned. However, its high abrasion-resistance makes it a superior leader material, and the choice of numerous top fishermen regardless of water quality.

ence when trolling for billfish and tuna, Bogdan claims that it does indeed provide an edge. “On a calm day, or when any portion of a leader is tracking through clean water beyond the prop wash, fluorocarbon leaders offer a definite advantage. We’ve seen it excel while white marlin fishing, especially on the far baits where ten to 12 feet of leader remains in the water. It has boosted our bites on numerous occasions.”

Like other captains who swear by fluorocarbon, Bogdan does a little “tweaking” to maximize its potential. Whether he’s live-baiting for sailfish or chunking for tuna, he stretches his leaders to remove any memory. “Fluorocarbon has memory. You can see the coils in the line as you remove it from the spool,” he says. “Fishing a leader that lays completely straight in the water is super important. We’ve doubled our tuna bites by stretching our leaders and removing the memory.”

For most of his tuna fishing, Bogdan uses between six and 12 feet

of leader. To straighten the leader, he places the rod in a holder and strips off line until the entire leader is outside the rod tip. He then hooks the bitter end of the leader to a fastener somewhere on the boat, tightens the drag, reels in the slack and keeps the leader under heavy tension for about five minutes.

Closely inspecting the leader is another part of Bogdan’s ritual. “When we set baits in the water column for tuna, their leaders and lines sometimes acquire what we call ‘mid-water pus,’” says Bogdan. “This is very common near the thermocline, and it’s made of things like fish eggs, jellyfish larvae and algae. You can see it on your lines and leaders when you wind them in. It may appear insignificant, but it can make the leaders more visible. When we check our baits, I make sure to wipe the leaders down with a soft cloth. Some crews use alcohol wipes.”

It’s also a good idea to study your leaders after each fish, no matter

how small the fish or brief the battle. Look for small nicks or abrasion, especially around the hook, lure and knots. Also, make sure the leader hasn’t been stressed; if it appears even slightly off-color or milky, replace it. Ditto any nicks along the leader, no matter how non-threatening they might appear. Remember, you purchased fluorocarbon for two key reasons: low visibility and abrasion resistance. Why compromise your strike potential by not replacing an old or scuffed leader, which may be more visible to a fish, and weaker?

Although its price has come down, fluorocarbon still represents a moderate expense for many anglers. Is the investment worth it? Captain Barry Gibson summed it up perfectly: “When you look at everything else you spend money on in fishing, and what it costs for just one fishing day, a couple spools of fluorocarbon isn’t much at all, especially when you consider the edge it will give you.”