



JOSH ROUSE/STAFF

From left, Yuji Kashiwada, Ayum Tomiyoma and Kei Sugimoto prepare a shot of a traditional Southwest Oklahoma catfish dinner for a show they filmed Wednesday for Japanese television. The show spotlights unique activities from all over the world in a humorous manner for viewers.

Japanese film crew goes noodling at Lake Lawtonka

By **JOSH ROUSE**
STAFF WRITER

A group of Japanese filmmakers will have a grand fish tale of monster catfish and Southern deep-fried food when they return home.

The five-person team was at Lake Lawtonka Wednesday filming an episode of a famous Japanese TV show that puts hosts in daring situations that most Japanese would never witness. Watched by 15 million viewers — four times the population of the state of Oklahoma — the show is a cultural phenomenon in the land of the rising sun.

Robert Smith, president of the Southwestern Oklahoma Regional Development Corporation, worked alongside Mayor Fred Fitch to bring the group to Law-

ton to do a segment on noodling. The outdoor sport has become popular recently due to segments on “River Monsters” and similar shows.

Kei Sugimoto, show coordinator, said he stumbled onto noodling while searching for possible show angles online.

“With this show we’re always researching interesting things to do,” Sugimoto said. “We just got off a story on whaling. I saw this on YouTube and thought it would be great.”

Representatives from the Nippon Television Network — one of the oldest and most popular networks in Japan — contacted Smith through his association with Bobby Sparks, who was featured on “River

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Cotton County noodler Bobby Sparks holds up a 40-pound catfish pulled out of Lake Lawtonka by the hostess of a Japanese TV show filming in the area Wednesday. Sparks took the crew out on the lake to get footage of noodling — a unique sport to Japanese viewers.



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With a spread set, Yuji Kashiwada, Kei Sugimoto and Ayum Tomiyoma pick out pieces of catfish while Brandy Sparks watches. The three men are part of a Japanese film crew in Lawton Wednesday to film an episode of a famous show that features different unique activities from all over the world.

CREW: Japanese viewers will be shown how to noodle

CONTINUED FROM 1A

Monsters" along with his wife, Brandy. Southwest Oklahoma was in competition with several locations in Tennessee and throughout Oklahoma. Smith credits Fitch with helping to bring the film crew to Lake Lawtonka.

"We've been working with them on this for about a month," Smith said. "The City of Lawton has really bent over backward to ensure they come here and showcase our area."

Smith said he and a group of other local businessmen worked hard to bring the crew to Lake Lawtonka where they could film in the shadow of Mount Scott.

"We thought the mountains and the lake would be great persuaders to the Japanese because of how scenic and beautiful it is," he said. "We may not have a lot of area like this in Southwest Oklahoma, but we have it here and they accepted."

Due to scheduling conflicts with a whaling shoot in Canada, the film crew was only able to spend one day at the lake. The crew flew into the area around 3 a.m. Their first stop was by the Comanche Nation complex, where they watched a dance demonstration.

"The one thing that we

have in Oklahoma that nowhere else has is cowboys and Indians," Smith said. "The film crew was fascinated by them."

After the demonstration, the crew was escorted to Lake Lawtonka. Sparks met with them early Wednesday morning and showed them the basics of noodling. A large trailer tank was brought in to allow the hostess to be filmed practicing pulling a catfish out of the water bare-handed. After preliminary runs, the crew went out on the water for much of the day while others stayed back on shore to prepare what catfish had been brought in earlier. The original plan was for the crew to film the hostess filleting the fish and cooking it, but conflicting schedules prohibited it. When the crew came back, they celebrated the catch of a 40-pound catfish by the hostess. After they cleaned and changed clothes, they were treated to a true deep-fried catfish dinner — Southwest Oklahoma style.

"This really shows them what our area is all about," Smith said. "The average Japanese ... is sitting at home and sees this and

when they come to Southwest Oklahoma, they'll know how to noodle."

Fitch showed up to the camp site around 6 p.m. to lend his personal support to the cause. He said the film crew coming to this area was a great opportunity to show international audiences what Southwest Oklahoma is all about.

"There's no telling what is going to come our way once this hits the airwaves over there," Fitch said. "It was a great honor for them to come out and noodle with Bobby and his family. We're glad Smith was able to get this ball rolling and bring them here to show them our culture."

One thing is for sure, Sugimoto said, catfish noodling was something he never would have believed if he hadn't seen it with his own eyes.

"We catch a lot of fish in Japan, but we have never thought about doing it this way," he said. "I do not think anyone back there knows about noodling. We had a great time and were glad we were able to come out."