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## Dispatch: Angler's Reward is Photos, Not Fillets

Heeding reports on the effects on fish stock, local fisherman Eric Huner spreads the word on catch-and-release.

By [Lon Cohen](#) | [Email the author](#) | October 24, 2011

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Eric Huner with a 41-inch striped bass. Credit Courtesy of Eric Huner

For Eric Huner, an East Setauket resident who regularly fishes out of Port Jefferson Harbor, catch-and-release is the only way to fish. And for the sake of the Long Island Sound, he hopes more people follow suit.

"My father used to encourage me to spare the life of the fish that I caught and with this I practiced catch-and-release," he said.

Huner recalls his father as the kind of man who quite literally wouldn't hurt a fly.

"He used to catch flies with his bare hands and let them go and he would do the same for spiders and other insects too," he said. "He probably instilled this within me."

With the Long Island Sound being an active waterway for recreational fishing, not releasing your catch could have disastrous results on the fish stock. Especially since regulations say only the bigger fish, dubbed 'lunkers' by fishermen, are allowed to be thrown into coolers and filleted for dinner.

That leaves behind a population where fewer adult fish are available to reproduce, threatening the species as a whole, according to 1995 paper written for New York Sea Grant by Mark H. Malchoff and David B. MacNeill on the practice of catch-and-release.

"Natural mortality removes most fish before they get to be 'lunkers,' minimizing the fishing mortality helps ensure that bigger fish exist in the population," they said.

They do point out that for catch-and-release to have a positive effect on increasing the health of fish populations, it's important that released fish survive.

According to Huner, there are many factors that affect whether or not a fish lives after it's released.

He guessed that the average fisherman accidentally kills 40 percent of what he catches on bait and less than 10 percent on lures. That changes with more experienced fishermen.

"An experienced fisherman probably accidentally kills 20 percent on bait and less than 5 percent on artificial," he said.

Judging by a 2003 study conducted by the New York State Department of Conservation, he may not be far off.

The report found 15 percent of striped bass hooked in the Hudson River died after they were released. And the kill rate on live bait was higher than using artificial lures.

The study also discovered that the death rate could be lowered by the use of a particular kind of hook called circle hooks.

Mark McGowan, owner of Cow Harbor Bait and Tackle in Northport said the reason circle hooks are better is in the way they snag the fish.

"Circle hooks are designed to catch fish in the jaw rather than gut hook the fish," he said.

A gut hook is when the fish swallows the bait and the hook gets stuck deeper inside its body.

Huner uses circle hooks for the same reason. He also combines the right tackle with the right technique to preserve the fish.

"I set the hook on fish in a timely manner," he said. "I don't wait forever to strike the fish."

While a fish dinner might seem the perfect prize after a big catch, Huner says a simple photo can suffice.

"I usually de-hook a fish, try to get a quick photo, and then I return the fish," said Huner.

Part of the problem is that many anglers don't understand is that there's also a proper way to release a fish to minimize harm.

"I don't just throw the fish in like a baseball," he said. "I lean over the side of the boat and hold the fish by the tail and face the fish into the current and push the fish back and forth so that oxygenated water can pass through the gills."

Huner, who is originally from Syracuse, started fishing the freshwater lakes of upstate New York when he was five. Wherever he went he said he had a fishing pole with him.

At 41 years old, fishing brings him back to his youth and the lessons his father taught him about preserving the life of a fish.

"Now that he has died, I feel a connection with him every time I release fish," he said.

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