

Release Fish Successfully

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Change In Paradigm

It's probably a fair statement that few people considered the sustainability of the planet's resources, until the 1970s. A popular perception was that natural resources were to be used freely. A burgeoning society with greater needs altered the model. The paradigm may have changed out of necessity and many people have grown to appreciate and cherish our natural resources. Today's laws allow anglers to keep fish, usually through size and bag limits. Anglers can use special release techniques and careful handling of 'non keepers' to help to make these conservation laws successful.

My Dad

My father introduced me to fishing and we shared a great love and respect for each other, and the sport. Indeed, he was ahead of his time. When we began to fish together in the 1940s, it was not uncommon for anglers to keep every fish. Fish were more abundant and easier to catch, and that was the way many anglers fished. As a child, I once caught a small fish and I wanted to show it to my mother. My dad's advice was, "Let's throw it back and it will grow, and we'll catch him next year". Sometimes he would say, "We have enough fish, let that one go". His philosophy made sense and it taught me the values of catch and release.

However, this article isn't intended as youthful reminiscence and I will address specific instructions later. Anglers should understand basic handling and release principles, and make adjustments based upon the circumstances. The first decision is whether or not to release fish, and use special techniques to minimize trauma when the fish is hooked, handled, and released.

Get Them Back Fast

A hooked fish is under stress that is increased when it is removed from water. It is important to fight fish tough,



Photos on pages 5-6 by Tom Schlichter, Ryan Schlichter and Felicia Scocozza

unhook them quickly, and return them as soon as possible. Fish may bleed at the spot where it was hooked. Many beginners abhor blood; however, blood dissolves in water readily, and it makes the wound appear worse. Fish that are built for speed, such as bluefish, may bleed more than other fish. Bleeding usually stops after the fish is returned to the water, and anglers can use simple tools to remove the hooks. These tools include needle nose pliers and dehookers, and they can be purchased from a bait and tackle store. Never rip or remove tackle that is caught in the throat and gills, and avoid putting your fingers in these delicate parts. Cut the leader close to the fish instead, if it is hooked in these delicate parts before releasing it. Fish mortality can be reduced for deeply hooked fish with this approach.

Adjusting the Release Plan

These basic principles may be adjusted based upon the type of fish and its size. Small fish can be unhooked and released successfully under many circumstances, and unless an angler is fishing with very light tackle, these fish can be landed well within one minute. I've used a gentle low toss to wake them up as they are released. Larger fish that have struggled may be sluggish and they should be 'walked' back until they recover. This means that

if the angler is right-handed, that hand is used to grasp the tail firmly, while the left hand supports the mid-section. Position the fish into the current if possible, or resuscitate it by moving it back and forth to push water into the mouth and over the gills. Release the fish as soon as it becomes alert.

Hard fighters and fast swimmers require more care and attention for successful release when compared to slower moving fish.

Indicators of Readiness

Fish use two signals to tell anglers that they are ready to be released. An erect dorsal fin means the fish is alert, but a flat fin means the fish is still groggy. The second clue is its ability to remain upright in water unaided. If a fish rolls over, it has not recovered. With practice and experience, you too will learn how much TLC to apply before releasing the fish. You may not be able to save every fish, but you can minimize the trauma with care and skill and have a lot more fish to enjoy.

