Catch and Release of Freshwater Fish

Handling and releasing the fish

Keep handling to a minimum. If possible, release fish without removing them from the water. In most freshwater species, by firmly grasping the lower jaw between thumb and forefinger, you can prevent a fish from battering itself against the boat, or other solid object, while you remove the hook.

If you must remove the fish from the water. Remove fish from the water carefully, using a shallow landing net, preferably of rubber or knotless nylon. These nets will remove less slime and will reduce wounding and time out of water. Keep control of the fish so that it cannot flop around and cause further wounds or loss of slime. Placing a wet cloth over the fish's eyes will help calm it. Never hold or restrain a fish by the gills.

If you must handle fish, use wet rubber gloves and place on a wet towel to minimize slime loss. If you must use your hands, be sure to wet them first. Cradle the fish on its back and calm it by covering its eyes. Always avoid touching the delicate gills which fish use to take in oxygen from the water.

After removing the hook, gently release fish into the water upright and head first. Revive an exhausted fish by leading it through the water or by moving it gently back and forth in the water until it recovers enough to swim away.

Difficult hooks

Carefully remove hooks inside the fish's mouth, gill or gullet with tools like needlenose pliers that can grasp a hook or a de-hooking device. When the hook is in the stomach, or deep in the gullet where it cannot be removed quickly, leave the hook and cut the line close to the hook. Fish commonly expel hooks from their stomachs.

Using A Live Well

While some species of fish can survive for long periods of time in a live well, others cannot. ***Never*** place fish you plan to release into a live well, and then cull them as more, or larger fish are caught. Undersized, over the limit, or unwanted fish should be released immediately.

By increasing the survival rate of released fish, anglers help to ensure the future of their sport.

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Conservation

Currently, many species of popular game fish have legally mandated size and catch limits, requiring anglers to release undersized and over the limit fish. Many anglers voluntarily release their fish. If these fish are not released properly, their chance of survival is reduced. Conservation-minded anglers must learn the proper techniques for releasing fish in good condition, and should plan ahead to have the equipment necessary to apply these techniques.

Whether Anglers choose to release fish or are required to do so by law, all released fish should be handled carefully to give the fish the best chance for survival.

Factors That Reduce A Fish's Chance For Survival

- **Handling**. Squeezing, rough handing, or allowing a fish to flop in the boat or on a solid surface can damage internal organs and remove protective scales and mucus.

- **Time out of the water**. As long as a fish is out of the water, it cannot breathe or restore its chemical balance.

- **Wounds**. Anglers should minimize the damage caused by hooks and by handling. Use care when backing hooks out.

- **Loss of Slime**. Fish have a slime layer (mucus) over their scales and skin which helps reduce the risk of infection. This layer also serves to lessen the drag on the fish as it swims. Rough handling can remove this protective layer.

- **Exhaustion**. A long fight on the line can upset a fish's body chemistry. Fish to be released should be brought to the boat quickly, not fought to exhaustion.

Planning ahead

- **Be Prepared**. Have close at hand all necessary tools such as needlenose pliers, hook remover, ruler, and camera.

- **Use tackle that is strong enough**. Many fishermen use light tackle to be more sporting, but fish you plan to release should be brought to the boat quickly to minimize exhaustion. This becomes especially important when fishing in warm water.

- **Use artificial baits whenever possible**. Fish tend to swallow natural baits, while they are usually hooked in the lip or mouth with artificial baits. A lip wound is much less severe than a gut wound. Set the hook quickly when using natural bait so the fish does not have time to swallow.

- **Use single, barbless hooks**. Barbless hooks can be removed from a fish much more easily than barbed hooks, causing less damage and reducing time out of water. Anglers who have fished with barbless hooks for years say they hook and land just as many fish.

  Barbs can be bent or filed down easily on bait hooks or artificial lures. You can leave a bump instead of a barb to prevent the hook from coming out too soon. Some barbless hooks are made with a bend to serve this purpose. Reduce the use of treble hooks to minimize wounding and time out of water. Often, single hooks can replace trebles or tines can be clipped without ruining the action of the lure.

  Circle hooks are less likely to be swallowed and are more apt to catch fish through the jaw or lip, allowing for easier release with less injury to the fish. Circle hooks should be used when fishing with natural bait.

  Hooks made of chrome plated steel, gold plated steel and "bronzed" steel all corrode quickly, in or out of fish and should be used whenever possible. Stainless steel hooks do not corrode and stay in fish. Cadmium/tin plated steel hooks corrode slowly and may become toxic if left in fish.