HANDLING FISH PROPERLY

By adopting just a few simple habits, you can increase the survival rate of fish you catch with proper handling during the landing and release. This means you can positively influence the future of Florida's saltwater fish populations, so strive for 100% survival of the fish you release!

- Decide beforehand which fish are to be kept, and immediately release all others.
- Release a fish while it's in the water whenever possible. Large fish such as tarpon can injure themselves and anglers.
- The protective slime on a fish is important, so handle fish as little as possible. If you must handle a fish, only use wet hands and never use a towel.
- It is best for the fish to take pictures of it while still in the water.
- Avoid lifting a fish from the water by the line. If you use a landing tool such as a Boga-Grip® to control the fish, support the body of the fish with your hand if you have to lift it into the boat.
- If a fish needs to be taken out of the water to measure it, vent it, or to remove the hook, this is a perfect opportunity to quickly take a picture of the fish.
- Avoid lifting a fish by its jaw, especially large fish. This can injure the fish so it can't feed normally and may harm its internal organs.
- If a hook is deep in a fish's throat or stomach, cut the line as close as possible to the hook. The hook will eventually dissolve or pass.
- Once you are ready to release the fish, gently release the fish head first into the water. If a fish is exhausted, revive it before releasing it by passing water over the gills. Move it forward in the water with its mouth open or hold it facing into the current, allowing water to flow through its mouth. Be cautious of predators while reviving fish.
- Only gaff a fish when you intend to keep it.
- Never hold a fish by its gill cover and never put anything in a fish's gills or eyes.

A FISH IS TOO VALUABLE TO CATCH ONLY ONCE!

Florida is the "Fishing Capital of the World," largely because Florida carefully manages its valuable marine resources.

We often are required to release saltwater fish when we catch them to help maintain fish populations, and more and more anglers are practicing "catch-and-release" to do their part to conserve marine fisheries while they enjoy their outdoor fishing experiences.

For more information on catch-and-release fishing, proper fish handling techniques, and saltwater fishing regulations, contact these offices:

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
620 South Meridian Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1600
www.MyFWC.com/saltwater
(850) 487-0554

Florida Sea Grant
PO Box 110409
Gainesville, FL 32611-0409
www.flseagrant.org
www.catchandrelease.org
(352) 392-1837

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CATCH & RELEASE

WAYS YOU CAN HELP SALTWATER FISH SURVIVE!

RELEASING A FISH SAFELY WITH MINIMAL HARM IS KEY TO HELPING IT SURVIVE.

TACKLE, TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES – CONSERVATION-MINDED ANGLERS STRIVE TO SAVE 100% OF THE FISH THEY RELEASE!

QUICK TIPS

- Use tackle heavy enough to land a fish quickly, which helps minimize exhaustion. A less exhausted fish will be able to better avoid predators.
- **Use a dehooking tool** to help remove hooks safely and quickly without handling the fish.
- Use either corrosive or non-stainless steel hooks because they dissolve if they remain in the fish.
- Use circle hooks, which tend to hook a fish in the jaw, thus reducing the chances of damage due to gut hooking.

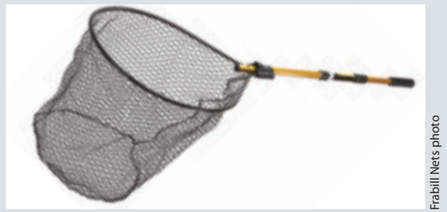
If you use lures with multiple sets of treble hooks, remove 1 or 2 of the hooks. Also cutting off 1 of the 3 points from the remaining sets of trebles makes it easier to recover the lure from the fish.

UF/IFAS photos

Bend the barb down on fishing hooks (as shown in lower photo) to make removal easier and reduce injury to the fish.

UF/IFAS photos

Use non-offset circle hooks (left) when fishing with natural bait to avoid gut-hooking a fish.



Frabill Nets photo

If a net is needed to land or control the fish, always use a knotless, rubber-coated net.

CIRCLE HOOKS

J Hook Circle Hook

UF/IFAS photo

Bryan Fluech photo

The chief advantage to using circle hooks is that fish are almost never deep-hooked.

Circle hooks are made so the point is turned perpendicular to the shank to form a circular or oval shape. Circle hooks are best used any time you are using natural bait, live or dead.

Research has found that circle hooks are more likely to hook a fish in the mouth instead of in the esophagus or stomach. Hooking a fish in the mouth reduces internal harm and decreases dehooking time.

Kahle, or Circle-C hooks are not considered circle hooks.

DEHOOKING TOOLS

UF/IFAS photo

There is a wide variety of de-hooking tools available on the market today.

Dehooking tools, or dehookers, allow the hook to be secured and the barb shielded without re-engaging when the hook is removed from a fish.

These tools come in a variety of shapes and sizes; use the tool that works best for you and the fish you are targeting. If a fish swallows the hook, it is better to cut the line as close as possible to the hook instead of trying to remove it. The hook may eventually dissolve or pass through the fish.

DEEP-WATER RELEASE

Successful release of fish caught in deep water can be a challenge. Reef fish taken from deeper water undergo expansion of gases in the swim bladder as they are brought to the surface. This can result in a ruptured swim bladder and other physical damage to the fish, a condition called barotrauma. Because the expanded gas is still trapped in the body cavity, it is difficult for the fish to swim back to the bottom on its own.

WILL A FISH NEED YOUR HELP?

Both venting and descending devices should only be used when signs of barotrauma are present. Make sure to follow current fishing regulations when deciding which tools to carry on your vessel.

Signs of barotrauma include protrusion of the stomach from the fish's mouth, bulging eyes, bloated belly, and distended intestines. Different species react differently.

If you see any or all of these signs, the fish will probably need help descending, but sometimes the signs are not readily apparent. Only fish that are unable to swim back down should be subjected to additional handling. If the fish is actively fighting and attempting to swim down when it is brought to the surface it may not need help to be descended. Practice and experience will help you make the best decision.

Everted, or protruding stomach

Bulging eyes

Distended intestines

Bryan Fluech photos

Bloated belly

DESCENDING AND DESCENDING TOOLS

In recent years a number of descending devices have been developed – some home-made, some manufactured – to descend deep-water fish without having to puncture the body cavity. Although more research is needed, there are indications that descending tools and techniques may greatly increase survival of released fish. A few are shown. This does not imply endorsement of a particular product. The type of device to use is often based on individual angler preference and local fishing conditions.

Pressurized release tool

Weighted milk crate

Shelton Fish Descender photo

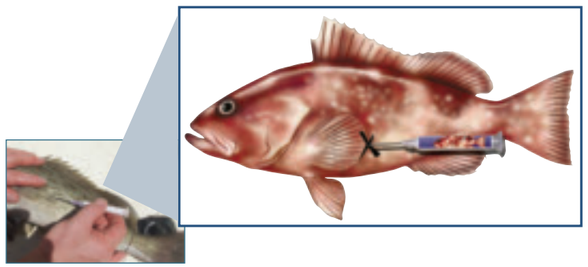
S-shaped wire hook clip

Bryan Fluech photos

Weighted spring release tool

VENTING AND VENTING TOOLS

Venting tools are sharpened, hollow instruments that help release expanded gas from the fish body cavity – enabling fish to swim back to capture depth. A variety of tools are available; however, tools such as a knife or an ice pick are not considered to be venting tools. To vent, insert the tool into the body cavity at a 45-degree angle. Place it under a scale approximately 1 to 2 inches behind the base of the pectoral fin, just deep enough to release trapped gas.



Venting helps release gases that may over-expand in the body cavity when fish are brought to the surface from deep water.