

# TIPS ON THE RELEASE OF FISH

SADSAA has decided to adopt the catch and release option for all tournaments. From an ethical point of view, all fish to be released must be in a condition where they have a good chance of survival. It is no good releasing a dead or moribund fish so as to claim points for release. The skipper must be the judge.

There are a few points which are important when contemplating the release of all fish.

## 1. GENERAL (This applies to all categories of fish and should be read together with each section.)

- If fish are to be released, one must plan beforehand for such a release.
- The longer a fish is out of the water the less chance it has of survival.
- Fish are covered in a layer of mucus / slime which protects them from infection. Fish should thus be handled as gently and as little as possible, with wet hands and placed on a wet towel or a wet foam mattress.
- Fish bodies are supported by water. If the fish must be removed from the water, the best way to take a fish out of the water is to use a large, fine-mesh landing net or stretcher or alternatively use a bogo grip to hold the fish's lower jaw. Place a hand under the belly before lifting it out of the water. Large fish should preferably not be hauled on board but released while still in the water. The effect of gravity while lifting fish out of water by the head can damage internal organs.
- Do not place fingers into gills or eye sockets as these organs can be damaged.
- Sunlight damages fish eyes – cover with a wet cloth while on deck.
- Lactacidosis is the buildup of lactic acid in the body as a result of prolonged strenuous activity. Normal energy production is aerobic and produces energy and carbon dioxide. Once the oxygen in the blood is exhausted, energy is produced anaerobically and produces lactic acid as a byproduct. This lowers the body pH and can cause rupture of muscle fibres (including heart muscle fibres) which renders the fish stiff and vulnerable to predators and may lead to death up to 3 days later. Therefore the longer the fight the greater the extent of lactacidosis and the less the chance of survival. So, if a fish is to be released, do not use extremely low breaking strain line and fight the fish for extended periods but rather use suitable tackle, bring the fish in quickly and release it as soon as possible.
- Resuscitation. Fish rely on water passing over their gills to assimilate oxygen. Billfish particularly, benefit by being towed headfirst next to the boat for some time to allow them to recover.
- All fish should be returned gently, head first, to the water.

## 2. BILLFISH

- Where possible, billfish should not be boated but should be released without removing them from the water as thrashing around on deck causes extreme stress, increases lactacidosis, removes slime and causes severe bruising.
- Where possible hooks should be removed as hooks left in the mouth can remain for extended periods and lead to infections and hinder feeding. Where the fish is hooked deeply it stands a better chance of survival if the hook is left in as attempts at removal will exacerbate the damage.
- When fishing with live or dead bait use circle hooks which frequently hook in the corner of the jaw and reduce the chances of deep hooking. Circle hooks can be removed either by reversing them out or by grabbing them outside the mouth, pulling them through and cutting the leader.
- Barbless hooks (flattened barbs) should be used on lures so as to make their removal easier and quicker.

- In Australia the use of a “snooter” is becoming popular. This is a loop of rope in a plastic pipe which is used to snare the top bill and gives better control of the fish. It also allows the fish to be more easily towed beside the boat for resuscitation and subsequent release.
- The time taken to subdue the fish is critical. It must not arrive at the boat too green as its thrashing will cause further damage, nor must the fish be too exhausted by the fight with resultant severe lactic acidosis. Tackle must be suitable and if a green fish is brought alongside and the leader is in hand, do try and remove the hook or lure but simply cut the snood.
- Where necessary resuscitate the fish prior to release for the best chances of survival.

### **3. TUNA**

- Tuna can fight themselves to the death, so not all will survive.
- If tuna are to be released preferably do not boat them but keep them in the water and practice “tip and release”. If insistent on boating the fish before release, lift small tuna by the hook snood while supporting the mid-section and lay onto a wet towel or foam mattress.
- Do not lift tuna by the tail as this removes slime and can cause vertebral separation and spinal cord damage.
- When fishing with bait, use circle hooks. Flatten barbs of lures.
- Keep large fish in the water and keep the head submerged as much as possible while removing the hook.

### **4. DEEP WATER BOTTOM FISH**

- Bringing fish up from depth leads to barotrauma resulting in an expansion of the swim bladder with subsequent prolapse of the stomach and bulging eyes. Unless the gas can be released or recompressed the fish will float and die from exposure. The gas can be released by puncturing the swim bladder through the body wall behind the pectoral fin with a hypodermic needle. However, this needs practice as the position of the swim bladder varies in different species and if the swim bladder is missed, the needle can cause other internal injuries. The recommended method of releasing fish that have suffered barotrauma is to use the reverse hook and weight method. A large weight is tied to the eye of a large hook with a flattened barb. Line from a rod and reel is then attached to the bend of the hook (upside down). The hook is gently inserted into the top lip of the fish and the fish is released back down to the bottom. The gas in the swim bladder is then recompressed and a quick jerk on the rod releases the hook allowing the fish to swim away unharmed.
- When taking the fish out of the water if no landing net or stretcher is available, it can be lifted using the hook snood or a bogo-grip but it must be well supported by a wet hand under the mid-section of the body.