

Releasing Fish With a Chance of Survival

By: Capt. David Bacon

I believe that anglers are taking much greater care when releasing fish not destined for the dinner table. As a community, we have learned to care about our fisheries resources and so we need to focus on learning the lesson that safely releasing a fish to grow and thrive requires careful handling and an understanding of the special needs of individual fish species based upon their anatomies.

Various species require slightly different handling in order to keep from injuring them however there are three things common to all gamefish. These are the three “Don’ts”:

1) Don’t tear the gills.

2) Don’t rip flesh when removing the hook. It is better to leave a hook to rust out than to tear flesh while removing it.

3) Don’t touch the skin on the fish because it removes the slime coat thereby making the fish vulnerable to infections and parasites. I shudder when I see someone pick up a fish with a rag. Even if it is a wet rag, that is soon to be a dead fish, though carefully released.

Let’s look at various species of mid-size gamefish and consider how to handle each one.

Calico bass and Sand bass: One thing I have learned over my decades of chartering is that bass are one of our most sought after species. Calicos and sandies can be discussed together because their mouths are similar. They have sturdy jaws and small teeth which makes it easy to “lip latch” them by inserting a thumb into their mouths and putting the forefinger crosswise under the chin. Gently bend the mouth open to immobilize the fish for the hook extraction work. All-in-all, bass are pretty easy to work with.



Barracuda: These critters have very delicate mouths. I like to use single hooks rather than treble hooks, to keep from mangling their mouths while removing the hook. The gills are easy to damage and it is extremely important to refrain from touching the skin. I like to use a tool to hold cudas while removing the hook. It is a plastic handle with a long spike that slides up through the corner of the gill plate cover and out the mouth. This reduces chance of injury.

White seabass: These croakers can't be kept out of the water long, so it is important to release them quickly. Netting them and removing the hook while the fish is suspended above the deck works well. Alternatively, slide fingers up the inside of the gill plate cover to lift them without touching the sensitive gills. Remove the hook or cut the line near the hook if it is deep inside the throat. Then put the fish gently in the water to swim away. On occasion, I have helped the fish's mouth open over the outflow from the bait tank to put some oxygenated water over its gills before releasing it.

Halibut: These are fairly robust fish if released quickly. Never put fingers inside a halibut's mouth because they have some serious teeth with which to put holes in the finger. It is often best to remove the hook while the halibut is in a net and release it from the net without ever touching the fish.

Yellowtail: These are strong fish, unless the battle was a long one and the fish is entirely spent. It is okay to pick it up by the gill plate without touching the gills, remove the hook and gently release the fish. When a 'tail is very tired, I again occasionally hold the fish's mouth open over the outflow from the bait tank.

Tuna: These fish tend to be very tired because they fight like there is no tomorrow... which is entirely possible for them. On larger tunas, reach over the side and remove the hook or cut the line without lifting the fish. On smaller tunas, I recommend using a net then removing the hook and releasing the fish without touching it directly.

Sheephead: If you value your thumb, do not put it in the mouth of a sheephead. Those jaws and teeth were made for crunching crustaceans. The gill plates are held tightly to its sides, so the typical way to hold and lift a sheephead is by the eye sockets, as gently as possible.



Salmon: Handle with care, because these fish have some very soft spots in their mouths and additionally their gills are easily damaged. Do not bounce a salmon aboard a boat because for one the hook may rip out and also because the risk of damaging the fish is too great. Net the fish, carefully remove the hook and release it with the net so that human hands do not touch it.

Striped bass: They may not have the same mouth integrity as a slow-growing calico bass or a sand bass, but they do have mouths strong enough for carefully lifting the fish. Just inside the gill-plate cover is another way to lift it, but the best bet is to use a net and release it from the net. Surf fishers generally have to use their hands, while boaters can use nets.

Ling Cod: The only safe place to grab a Lingcod is inside the gill plate cover. The gills have very sharp red rakers that can easily slice a hand, so be sure to hold only the gill cover. Extract the hook or cut the line and remove your hand quickly when releasing it in the water because the angry varmint may just bite the hand that releases it!

Rockfish: This may be the last species or family of species on the list, yet it has perhaps the most political significance because we are trying to show fisheries managers that we can release rockfish healthy so that they do not count every rockfish released as DOR (Dead-On-Release). The “3 don’ts” above certainly apply, but it is of paramount importance to quickly return that fish to the depth it was caught, or at least 100 feet (roughly the equivalent to 3 atmospheres) to recompress them, thereby negating the effects of barotrauma. While removing the hook, a rockfish can be handled very similarly to a calico and sand bass.

