

Let's Be Careful Out There

You can have your rockfish and save them too. A little TFC (tender fish-handling care) goes a long way toward preserving all Bay species for future anglers.

by John Page Williams



Top: Shawn Kimbro holding a fat rockfish in a cradle net for hook removal before releasing it. Below: Charlie Ebersberger of Anglers Sport Center in Annapolis with an EGO soft rubber landing net.

Ever catch a year-old rockfish while you're bottom-fishing for spot or white perch? If so, you know they're like hyperactive pincushions: all sharp spines and gill covers. These fish are the future of their species, but handling them is tricky business; get it wrong and you can jeopardize their survival, not to mention hurt yourself and squander precious fishing time. What to do?

Let's flash back about 20 years. The Bay's decimated rockfish stocks have finally begun to recover. A moratorium on their commercial harvest is about to be lifted. Management specialists such as Bill Goldsborough, director of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation's (CBF) fisheries program, are preparing new regulations for the soon-to-reopen fishery, rules designed to protect the species and resolve issues anglers are sure to confront, like deciding which fish to keep and how to release the rest with minimal harm.

Then as now, Goldsborough felt strongly that

recreational angler ethics and education could play a valuable role in protecting the fish. That's why he developed the Careful Catch program, a series of seminars on catch-and-release cohosted by the Maryland Saltwater Sportfishermen's Association (MSSA).

Some of the Bay's best angling minds, like Upper Bay skipper Ed Darwin, helped shape the program's core ideas. Today, Careful Catch is still educating anglers and protecting fish.

On the heels of those well attended initial seminars Goldsborough produced a brochure on Careful Catch release techniques. (MSSA still distributes copies to captains before its tournaments.) The brochure begins with the Creed of the Careful Angler: *As a good steward of the resource trying to conserve fishing for tomorrow, I will commit to keeping only the fish I need, and strive for 100% survival of all released fish.*

As an early participant in Careful Catch, I found it taught a way of thinking that treated the fish with the care and respect they deserve, while improving hookup rates and increasing fishing time, thanks to faster releases.

» Selective Harvest

Science played a big role in developing Careful Catch. Back then *In-Fisherman* magazine's staff fisheries biologist, Steve Quinn, wrote about the physiological stresses fish experience when they're caught and handled. The magazine also developed the concept of "selective harvest," the responsible management of species by "harvesting fish of certain sizes and species from an aquatic system." The concept got us thinking about which fish are most appropriate to eat and which should be let go, including both undersized and very large fish. (Rockfish, for example, are abundant and at their best eating



size in the 18- to 24-inch range.)

It's a key tenet of selective harvest: Decide ahead of time which fish you plan to keep and which you will release (assuming the fishing gods smile on you that day). In May 1992, Darwin and a group of experienced clients set a sterling example by releasing a potential state (if not world) record rockfish: a 58-inch, egg-laden cow estimated at 75 to 80 pounds. The group had decided before the boat departed that day to release any pre-spawn fish. This one lived to lay her 8 million or so eggs.

Careful Catch took a backseat over the years to more pressing issues like crab and menhaden policy and oyster restoration, but Goldsborough and I never lost faith we'd find a partner to spread the message of responsible fish handling. In 2008, Careful Catch entered the digital age. Shawn Kimbro, a whiz at angling and computers, agreed to join with CBF and the Coastal Conservation Association/Maryland to produce www.carefulcatch.com. The website is packed with information, diagrams and videos, including practical Careful Catch tips and explanations of their scientific bases. There's also a downloadable brochure with pictures demonstrating the use of the type of button-hook dehooker that is just the right tool to turn loose those prickly puppy rockfish almost instantly without

handling them.

Thanks to a recent grant from the BoatU.S. Foundation for Boating Safety and Clean Water, the site is being upgraded to feature a bulletin board on which anglers can post their suggestions for Careful Catch best practices. We hope the Bay's angling community will pool its considerable expertise to help teach us all better ways to handle fish with care. (The board, still under development, won't be anonymous; anglers who participate must agree to identify themselves.)

The heart of Careful Catch is understanding the four major stressors fish face when they're caught and released: exhaustion, loss of slime, time out of the water and wounds. It pays to plan ahead for these issues by selecting the right

Some release tools and lures modified along Careful Catch principles (clockwise from bottom center): longnose hemostats, X-Tools pliers, Rising needlenose pliers, Rising 8.5" Lippa4Life lippling tool, DOA Clacker rattle float with Deceiver bucktail jig on, Storm Chug Bug and Rapala Jointed X-Rap Shad with hooks modified per Best Practices, ARC Dehooker, X-Rap Shad with modified SureSet tail hook, homemade J-dehooker.



A Best-Practices Primer

To get you started, here are some examples of Careful Catch practices I have found useful:

- Fish with crushed barbs and keep hooks sharp. The combination not only aids release, it also hooks fish better.
- When using bait on a hook with a crushed barb, clip off a short section from a spare plastic worm and slip it over what's left of the barb to keep the bait from sliding off.
- When possible, use single-hook lures like jigs and Texas-rigged soft plastic swim baits.
- Modify treble-hook plugs by cutting the rear tine off the front hook and crush the barbs on the front-facing two; then cut the lower tine off the rear hook and crush the barbs on the upper two. If either hook faces the wrong way, remove it from its split ring, turn it over and reattach it. (Good split ring pliers make this job much easier.) You'll find the combination of forward-facing double front hooks and upward-facing double rear hooks are very effective in hooking fish that strike, plus they also greatly reduce hook injuries to the fish and make release much easier, especially with a release tool like a J-hook dehooker.
- On spoons and spinners with treble hooks, cut one tine and crush the barbs. If the weight change alters the designed wobble of the spoon, consider using a hook one size larger. Consider also adding hair, feathers, flash material or tubing to the hook. Again, good split ring

pliers make this job much easier.

- When netting fish, always use a net made of rubberized "release netting." If you're using a conventional net, choose one with as large an opening as possible and a shallow, flat base that will support a fish securely without forcing its body to bend sharply. Consider using a two-pole "musky cradle" to support a large fish.
- Use a Boga-Grip, Lippa4Life or similar tool to control a fish's head, but do not lift it by the lower jaw.
- To remove hooks without touching the fish, whenever possible use hemostats, long-nose pliers, a J-hook dehooker, an ARC dehooker or another dehooking tool.
- Find ways to measure and photograph fish without lifting them from the water; for example, employ a musky cradle and a rigid wooden yardstick.
- If you must lift the fish, support its head and body with your hands. Lay it onto a wet deck or a wet towel and place a small wet towel over its eyes to calm it.
- Don't keep a fish out of the water longer than you can hold your breath.

If these ideas intrigue you, download and read the brochure at www.carefulcatch.com. Explore the rest of the site. Try the best practices you find there, and if you have a few of your own share them on the site's comment space.

tackle and having release tools immediately at hand.

»»» Exhaustion

Problem: An exhausted fish is similar to a fatigued human athlete. As it burns more and more energy, bodily chemical changes take place, including the buildup of harmful lactic acid. The longer the fight lasts, the more likely it will permanently affect the fish's health.

Solution: Use appropriate tackle to reduce fight time to a reasonable level, ideally 5 to 10 minutes tops under stressful conditions like hot weather. Large species may require a bit more time.

»»» Loss of Slime

Problem: Any body of water holds bacteria and fungi that can get under scales and infect a fish's skin. The Chesapeake's warm, nitrogen- and phosphorus-rich summer water is especially attractive to waterborne pathogens like *Micobacteriosis marinum* (implicated in fish lesions and wasting disease). This kind of infection can cause special problems when fish are crowded together between hot surface water and cooler but oxygen-depleted deeper water. The slime coating that most fish have is their primary defense against infection, so it is very important to maintain it.

Solution: If possible, release fish in the water without touching them. Dehooking tools make this process much easier—and faster—especially for undersized rockfish and blues. If you must handle a fish, do so with wet hands, supporting its body horizontally with both hands. If you use a net, choose one with soft nylon or rubber mesh (or a combination) and a flat floor that will support the fish well. One good option for large fish is a cradle like those used for East Coast Atlantic salmon, Midwestern muskies and West Coast steelhead.

»»» Time Out of the Water

Problem: Fish are built to be supported by water and their gills are designed to

stay wet. This allows dissolved oxygen to diffuse into blood vessels in gill filaments while wastes diffuse out. A fish out of water without proper body support can also suffer severe—but not immediately obvious—internal organ damage. The gill filaments collapse in the air, greatly reducing surface area for oxygen diffusion as they dry out. Abrupt temperature change causes great additional stress, especially if the air temperature is in the 90s (a sure killer).

Solution: Again, keep the fish in the water if you intend to release it, especially in the summer. Consider stopping catch-and-release fishing in the summer or fish early and late in the day when air temperatures tend to be lower. Use a net or cradle to suspend the fish in the water while you unhook, measure, photograph and release it. Have release tools—net/cradle, ruler and camera—ready ahead of time.

»»» Wounds

Problem: Hook wounds and other damages that cause external bleeding leave fish vulnerable to infection as well as physiological shock from blood loss.

Solution: Avoid using treble hooks. At a minimum, convert them to doubles by clipping a tine off each and always crimp down the barbs. If you're baitfishing use non-offset circle hooks and tend the lines carefully to avoid deep-hooking. 📌

The Tackle Box

- To buy dehooking tools, visit your local tackle shop or browse the websites of Bass Pro Shops (www.basspro.com) and Cabela's (www.cabelas.com).
- For deep-hooked fish, consider an ARC (Aquatic Release Conservation, Inc.) dehooker. The company's website (www.dehooker4arc.com) features information and instructional videos.
- For release-friendly nets and cradles, visit websites for Beckman Net Company (www.beckmannet.com), Ed Cumings (www.cumingsnets.com), EGO (www.adventureproducts.com) and Frabill (www.frabill.com).