

## Guidelines for Safe Catch and Release

Follow these guidelines to ensure the fish you release back into the water have the best chance of surviving!

- Whatever you do, do it quickly. Keeping an exhausted fish out of water is like holding a bag over a runner who has just completed a marathon. They both need oxygen to recuperate.
- Wet your hands or gloves before handling the fish. Do not injure the eyes or gills. Placing the fish on a wet towel will help the fish retain its protective slime. To keep the fish still, place it on its back or cover its eyes with a wet towel. Control the fish at all times! If you drop the fish, its chances of injury and death increase.
- Refrain from holding fish in a vertical position when inspecting or photographing them. Internal organs are displaced and stress is increased in this unnatural position. Large fish should never be held by the bottom jaw only, with a boca grip or otherwise (any tool designed to grip the lower jaw of caught fish to facilitate handling). Hold the fish horizontally by the lower jaw with one hand, and support the belly with the other hand. If unsupported, many large fish, will rupture the isthmus—a cartilaginous bundle of ligaments that connects the head and body—and the fish will die a slow death from starvation. This connection is necessary for the tremendous gulping action during feeding.
- If the hook is difficult to remove by hand, use long-nosed pliers or a hook-removal tool. Do not tear additional tissue by removing the hook. Back the hook through the original wound. If this fails, cut the leader and pull the hook forward through the injury. Do not lift a gut-hooked fish out of the water by the leader; this can increase damage to the fish.
- Try fishing with barbless hooks, or crimp and remove the barb. Catch rates using barbed or barbless hooks are not significantly different. Barbless hooks are easier to remove, and they cause less physical damage to the fish.
- Use circle hooks. They cause less injury and increase catch rates.
- If your fish is in good shape, immediately return it to the water headfirst. If it does not swim or is lethargic or erratic, some "resuscitation" may be needed until the fish can swim on its own. Revive exhausted, but otherwise healthy fish by first placing one hand under the tail and holding the bottom lip with the other. If the fish is in fair to good shape, merely hold it headfirst into the current. If it is severely lethargic, depress the bottom lip to cause the jaw to gape and **gently** move the fish forward. Moving the fish in an erratic back and forth motion will just induce more stress. Have you ever seen a fish swim backward and forward? At the first sign of the fish attempting to swim away—**let it go**. Prolonged attempts at resuscitation will be stressful to the fish.

*Courtesy of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission*