

# Handling Fish Properly

By adopting just a few simple habits, recreational anglers can greatly increase the chances that the fish they catch and release will survive, meaning each and every saltwater angler can positively influence the future of Florida's fishing stocks by striving for 100 percent survival of released fish.

- Handle fish as little as possible and only with wet hands – never with a towel.
- It's best to take pictures of a fish being released while it is in the water.

- If a net is needed to remove a fish from the water, use a knotless net.
- It's okay to take a picture of a fish if it needs to be briefly taken out of the water to measure it, vent it or remove the hook, but support the weight of the fish horizontally and safely return it to the water as quickly as possible – no lengthy "poses" just to take a picture.



- If a fish must be lifted from the water, support its weight horizontally.
- Avoid lifting a fish by its jaw, especially large fish. This can injure the fish so it can't feed normally and/or 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 inside the fish.



Captain Ken Chambers

*De-hooking tools allow fishermen to easily and safely remove hooks while the fish remains in the water.*

- If a fish is exhausted, revive it before releasing it by passing water over its gills – move it forward in the water with its mouth open.
- Gently release a fish head first into the water.
- Only gaff a fish when you're sure it's legal to harvest and you intend to keep it.
- Never hold a fish by its gill cover.
- Never put your hands or fingers in a fish's gills or eyes.
- Avoid lifting a fish from the water by the line.

## ***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 preserve marine fisheries while they enjoy their outdoor fishing experiences.

For more information on catch-and-release fishing, proper fish handling techniques, and the new Gulf of Mexico reef fish requirements, contact these offices:



Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission  
620 South Meridian Street  
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1600  
[www.MyFWC.com/marine](http://www.MyFWC.com/marine)  
(850) 488-6058



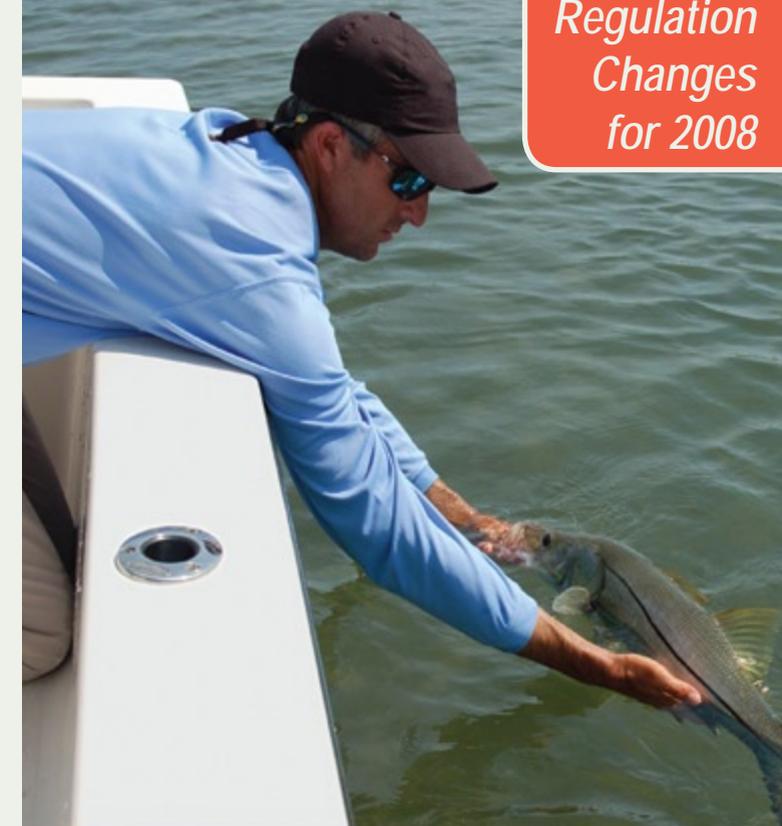
Florida Sea Grant  
PO Box 110409  
Gainesville, FL 32611-0409  
[www.flseagrants.org](http://www.flseagrants.org)  
[www.catchandrelease.org](http://www.catchandrelease.org)  
(352) 392-1837

Unless otherwise noted, all photos provided by Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Cover photo by John Merriwether

# Catch-and-Release Things you can do to help saltwater fish survive

**Inside:**  
*Gulf Reef  
Fishing  
Regulation  
Changes  
for 2008*



***Releasing a fish safely and free of harm is key to helping it survive. This guide offers tips on how you can properly handle and release saltwater fish.***

# Ways to Help Fish Survive

Research has shown that you can significantly increase the survival rate of fish you catch with proper handling during the release.

**Ethical anglers strive to save 100% of the fish they release.**

- Use tackle heavy enough to land a fish quickly to reduce exhaustion, which could result in its death or weaken it making it more vulnerable to predators.
- Release a fish while it's in the water whenever possible.
- Use a de-hooking device if needed to help remove hooks safely.
- Use non-stainless steel hooks – these hooks can dissolve if they remain in a fish.
- Use non-offset circle hooks when fishing with natural bait to avoid gut-hooking a fish – circle hooks tend to hook fish in the jaw, making them easy to remove.
- Bend barbs down on hooks so they can be removed with less damage to a fish.
- Use a venting tool if necessary to release pressure in a fish taken from deep water.

# Special Requirements for Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Anglers

**Beginning June 1, 2008, a person onboard a vessel harvesting any species of reef fish in Gulf of Mexico waters must possess and use non-stainless steel circle hooks when fishing with natural baits, a dehooking device and a venting tool. Reef fish species include all snappers, groupers, sea bass, amberjacks, gray triggerfish, hogfish, red porgy and golden tilefish.**

## Circle Hooks

Circle hooks are fishing hooks made so that the point is turned perpendicular to the shank to form a circular or oval shape.

If fishing for reef fish from a vessel in Florida Gulf state waters, the point of the circle hook used with natural bait cannot be offset from the shank.

Research has found that circle hooks are more likely to hook fish in the mouth instead of in the esophagus or stomach, which reduces harm to the fish.

If you accidentally catch a Gulf reef fish on a J hook while using natural bait, you must release it.



J Hook      Circle Hook

Daiichi Hooks



Non-offset circle hook      Offset circle hook

Florida Sea Grant



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

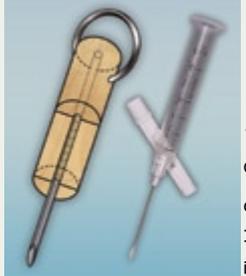
Florida Sea Grant



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

## Venting

Venting tools are sharpened, hollow instruments such as a hypodermic syringe with the plunger removed or a 16-gauge needle fixed to a hollow wooden dowel. Larger gauge needles may be harmful to the fish. A tool such as a knife or ice-pick is not allowed.



Florida Sea Grant

Reef fish taken from depths of 50 feet or more may undergo expansion of the gases in the swim bladder as they are brought to the surface. Signs of this condition are protrusion of the stomach from its mouth, bulging eyes and a bloated belly. Proper use of a venting tool will help the fish survive by allowing it to safely return to the bottom.

Deflation of a bloated Gulf reef fish must be done with the venting tool by inserting the needle into the body cavity at a 45-degree angle under a scale in an area approximately 1 to 2 inches behind the base of the pectoral fin just deep enough to release the trapped gas and to release the fish with minimum damage.

If the stomach is protruding from the mouth, don't puncture it or try to put it back into the mouth. It will return to its normal location following the release of a properly vented fish.

## De-hooking

De-hooking tools, or dehookers, are instruments that allow the hook to be secured and the barb shielded without re-engaging when the hook is removed from a fish. It must be blunt, have rounded edges and be of a size appropriate to secure the range of hook sizes and styles used in the Gulf reef fish fishery.

Dehookers come in a variety of shapes and sizes; use the tool that works best for the fish you are releasing.

If a fish swallows the hook, it may be better to cut the line as close as possible to the hook instead of trying to remove the hook.

