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Releasing giant (black) sea bass – Don't give them the "point"

You're out for a day of fishing on your family's boat. It's a beautiful day – you're anchored up near a kelp bed at Santa Catalina Island, the sun is shining, and the fish are biting. You hook what you think is a decent-sized kelp (calico) bass on your favorite swimbait, when something bigger – much bigger – picks up the calico and bores down towards the bottom. You can't stop it – your drag is screaming as the line peels from your spool. You tighten your drag down, and somehow you stop the fish's freight train-like run. After a long and tiresome battle (for both you and the fish), you eventually get the fish to color, and get your first look at what ate your calico: it's huge, and you immediately recognize it for what it is – a giant sea bass. With that recognition comes the

By Ed Roberts

recollection that this species is protected in California, and may not be targeted or retained by sport fishermen. As the fish nears the surface, the decreasing water pressure allows the gas inside the fish's swim bladder (a gas-filled organ that regulates the fish's position in the water column) to expand, which gives the fish a positive buoyancy. Exhausted from its struggle, the fish floats at the surface, unable to overcome this increased buoyancy and swim back down.

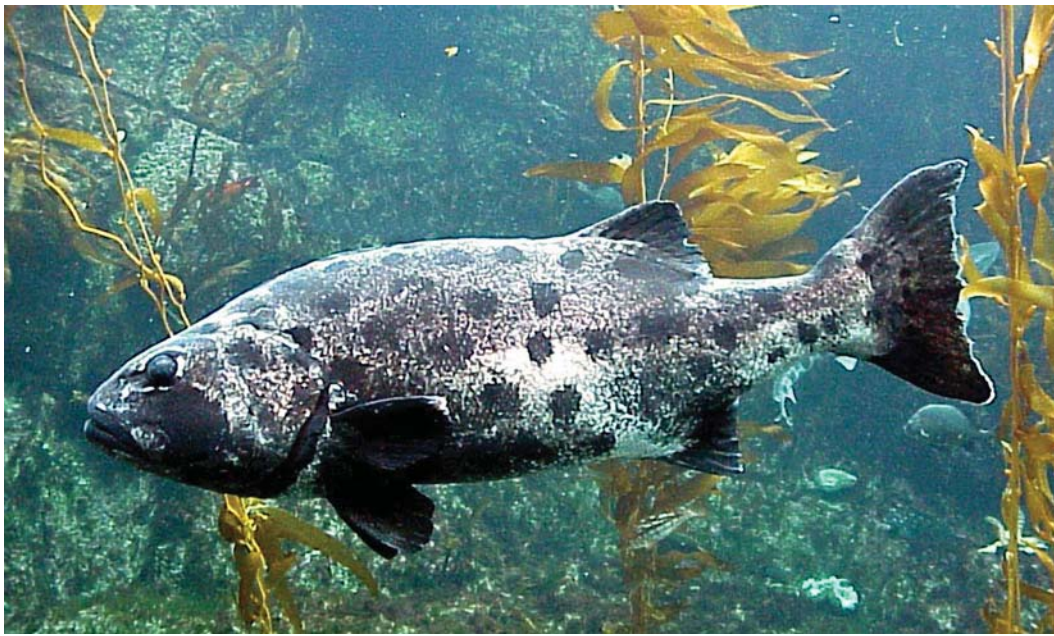
What should you do to ensure that this fish that you did not intend to catch has a good chance of surviving this battle and returning to the depths?

Giant sea bass (*Sterolepis gigas* – also commonly known as black sea bass, although this name is officially given to an Atlantic species) are the largest species of bony fish that the nearshore angler may encounter in Southern California. They get big, growing to over 7 feet in length and weighing more than 500 pounds. Once thought to be related to other basses found in the area (kelp bass, barred sand bass), giant sea bass are now more properly grouped with the wreckfishes (Family *Polyprionidae*). Juveniles are perch-shaped, orange, with large pelvic fins and big black spots. As they grow they become bass-shaped with large caudal fins; young adults are bronzy-purple to brown with large black spots, and adults are dark brown to black to gray, with white bellies. Some researchers believe this species has the ability to change color patterns at will, and the large black spots may be present at any age.

Once prized by sport fishermen in southern California, Baja and the Gulf of California for their size, overfishing reduced the populations of these fish to critically low levels.

"I tracked the annual sport landings of many species through CPFV (Commercial Passenger Fishing Vessels, or party/charter boats) log data," said Paul Gregory, retired associate marine biologist the California Department of Fish and Game (DFG). Gregory was responsible for monitoring party and charter boat catches for the DFG during the 1970s. "I noticed a severe decline in the number of giant sea bass that were caught off of sport boats, to the point that only a handful of fish were caught per year. The trend was very obvious – the numbers continued to spiral downward each year."

Gregory's analysis and recommendation to the California Fish and Game Commission eventually resulted in regulatory protection for the species, which has directly contributed to the increased numbers of fish and encounters with anglers that we are seeing and hearing about these



Giant sea bass.

DFG photo by Ed Roberts

Giant sea bass at Catalina Island.



Photo © Tim Johnson

To increase the chance of a giant sea bass surviving after being hooked:

Take the following steps:



Junvenile giant sea bass.

DFG photo by Ed Roberts

- Release at distance, as soon as you realize that you're hooked up with a GSB; whether that's at the beginning of the fight or at color – the sooner the better. Don't bring the fish to the surface if at all possible
- If the fish is at the surface, don't lift it out of the water. Do not gaff the fish, even in the lower jaw.
- Do not attempt to "deflate" the fish – incorrect insertion and/or infection will likely result in the fish's death.
- If possible, use a pole, weight, or other device to help lower the fish to a depth where it can swim away on its own.
- If no device is available, stay on site while the fish recovers its strength. Keep it safe in its weakness.

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Back to the dilemma at hand - how can you help this magnificent fish to recover and survive?

There are several steps that the saltwater sport angler can take to increase the chances of the fish surviving this encounter.

The experienced angler, when hooked up with a large fish, will have a pretty good idea within the first few minutes of battle that he/she is probably not fighting a yellowtail or white seabass. Breaking the line at this early stage, while the fish is still deep, would be best. Barring that, once the fish is brought to color and positively identified as a giant sea bass, break it off then. Dr. Michael Domeier, president of the Pflieger Institute of Environmental Research and a recognized authority on giant sea bass, suggests that sport fishermen should intentionally break the fish off once it's apparent that they have, in fact, hooked a giant sea bass.

Many anglers can't resist the urge to bring the fish all the way to the surface and boatside, lift it out of the water, then pose for a quick picture before releasing the fish. This is not in the fish's best interest. Breaking it off while the fish is still several feet below the surface (and still under some pressure) may allow it to overcome its increased buoyancy. Think about the fish, overcome the trophy photo urge, and release the fish at distance and depth.

So, the fish was brought to the surface before you recognized that you were fighting a giant sea bass, and a long distance release is no longer possible - what should you do then?

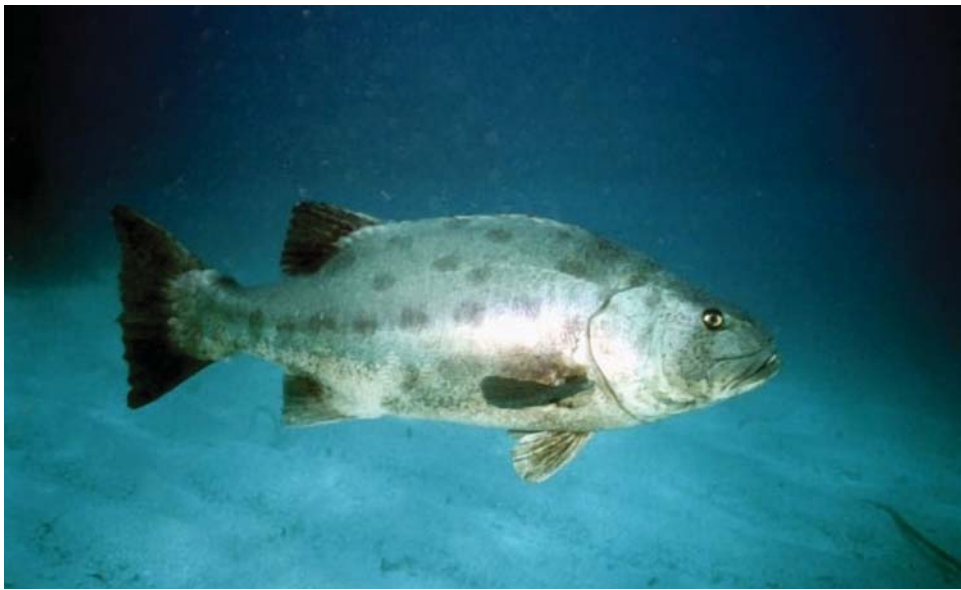
If at all possible, assist the fish in getting back down to depth to equalize the pressure inside and outside the swim bladder, with as little trauma to the fish as possible. How? Several people have fashioned their own release devices: Dr. Domeier fashioned a long pole that he would use to push the fish back down. One concerned angler/diver created a lip-gripping device that uses a heavy lead weight to sink the fish. Still other fishermen have developed their own devices from materials found onboard the average fishing boat, using a stiff rod, some light leader material, barbless hooks and large weights. Any large weight, attached to the fish with a very light leader and lowered on a strong line will get the fish down to a point where it will break the leader; you can then retrieve your weight on the strong line.

You don't have one of these prefabricated devices, or the materials at hand to make something yourself- what should you do then?

The fish is floating at the surface next to your boat for two reasons -the buoyancy that was already mentioned, and fatigue; the fight probably wore the fish out more than it did you. Keep the fish in the water - don't gaff it in the lower jaw and lift it out of the water to pose for a picture - remember, you're doing what's best for the fish, and that jaw is not designed to support the entire weight of the fish out of water. If you do want to get a quick picture, take one of the fish in the water alongside the boat, with your rod in the foreground for scale. Lean over the side of the boat to remove the hook or cut the line as close to the hook as possible, while the fish is in the water. Keep the fish near the boat, stay on site and give the fish a few minutes to recover its strength and swim down under its own power. Keep the seagulls at bay - they'll quickly descend on and begin pecking at a helpless giant that you let float away. Some concerned anglers have actually gone so far as to get in the water with the fish, and swim it back down to depth themselves.

Don't Puncture the Fish!

Many people believe that they can assist the fish by venting some of the gas in the expanded swim bladder, with a knife, syringe or similar device. While experiments have shown that this can be effective with certain species in controlled conditions using sterile technique, it is strongly



Giant sea bass.

Photo © Brad Mongeau

Dr. Michael Domeier's giant sea bass research can be viewed online at: <http://www.pier.org> His chapter on giant sea bass in DFG's "California's Living Marine Resources: A Status Report" can be seen at: <http://www.dfg.ca.gov/mrd/status/index.html>
Brad Mongeau's giant sea bass release device can be viewed at: <http://loveofsea.com/>



Photo © Tim Johnson

recommended that sport fishermen do not use this method. This is, for all intents and purposes, a surgical technique. Think about it - you are sticking a dirty knife (it may look clean, but do you actually keep a sterile -germ free - knife onboard your fishing boat?) into the side of the fish, hoping to hit a specific organ and miss all of the other vitals (the knife or syringe has to be inserted in a very specific spot - miss it, and you'll likely perforate the liver or other organs). While it's true that the fish may swim back down after it's been stuck, a punctured fish will more than likely die within weeks of internal injuries or of infection resulting from the dirty blade.

By being able to recognize giant sea bass and taking these steps to ensure their survival after an incidental hooking, sport fishermen can aid in the rebuilding of the population of this impressive species. This is true for any fish you want to release that is suffering from depressurization trauma. Don't give them the "point." 🐻

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