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## INTRODUCTION

Is it a keeper? This is a question anglers must answer each time they bring a hooked fish to within reach. If it is a keeper, the angler's top priority is to put it in the bag. However, if the fish cannot be legally kept or is too small to eat, how does the angler unhook and release it with a good chance to survive, grow, reproduce, and perhaps be caught again? This leaflet presents some techniques that will allow the angler to improve the chances of survival for released fish.

But first, why are there size and bag limit regulations which require the release of fish even though some of them might die in the process? The primary objective of these laws is to maintain populations of selected fishes at levels sufficient to sustain fisheries. To accomplish this objective, we apply our knowledge of the fish life histories to develop regulations which will insure that enough fish reach maturity to maintain reproductive capability in the population. The most common regulations which do this are bag limits, size limits, and season closures. These require anglers to return all fish that cannot be legally kept. Some anglers believe they should be able to keep fish that are likely to die and only release healthy ones. Fish and Game law requires anglers to return illegal dead and dying fish because if such fish were allowed in the bag, there would be no incentive to release fish in a healthy condition; they would all be considered "dead". Also, a dead fish is still dinner for some other sea creature and not truly "wasted".

A conservation-minded angler moves away from schools of small fish so that hooking and releasing are minimized, and strives to avoid injuries to fish which are thrown back. Remember, not only is it unethical to waste fish, it is also illegal.

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## TO INCREASE THE CHANCES OF A RELEASED FISH SURVIVING, ANGLERS SHOULD USE THE FOLLOWING PROCEDURES:

### **1. Do not use a gaff hook to land fish of questionable size.**

Not only is it unethical to seriously injure a fish that you might wind up having to release, it is illegal. Section 28.65(e) of Title 14, California Code of Regulations, states:

"No gaff hook shall be used to take or assist in landing any fish shorter than the minimum size limit. For the purpose of this section a gaff hook is any hook with or without a handle used to assist in landing fish or to take fish in such a manner that the fish does not take the hook voluntarily in its mouth. No person shall take fin fish from any boat or other floating device in ocean waters without having a landing net in possession or available for immediate use to assist in landing undersized fish of species having minimum size limits; the opening of any such landing net shall be not less than eighteen inches in diameter."

### **2. Use a "fish friendly" landing net**

Small mesh, knotless landing nets made of a non-abrasive material are recommended. Nets with large mesh can split the caudal (tail) fin rays of some species, such as halibut, which can lead to infection. Knotless, non-abrasive nets also reduce slime and scale loss, which will help the fish to survive after release.

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### **3. Don't let the fish hit the deck.**

A fish flopping around on the nonskid surface of most boats is losing scales, mucus, and skin which protect it from infection. Keep the fish suspended from the rod or in a net until it can be released.

### **4. Handle fish with a wet rag.**

If you have to hold on to the fish to unhook it, use a rag dipped into the bait tank or bucket of sea water. Make sure your hands are wet as well. The fish will be much less likely to lose scales and mucus. You may also save yourself from a painful wound when a spiny fish struggles to get away. Keep the wet rag draped over the rail. It won't blow away and is handy for keeping your hands clean.

### **5. Measure the fish as soon as possible.**

Obviously short fish should be released at the rail immediately. All questionable fish should be measured as soon as possible, so have your measuring device handy. You can easily turn your fishing rod into a measuring device by putting a baseline mark on your rod at eye level (rod-wrapping thread is best). Wrap similar marks at intervals toward the base of the rod corresponding to the legal lengths of fish in your area such as 12 inches for kelp and barred sand bass, 22 inches for California halibut, 24 inches for lingcod and 28 inches for California barracuda and white seabass. When you catch a fish that has a size limit, hold it against the rod with the nose at the baseline and compare the fish's length to the appropriate mark for a quick decision of legality. If the length is close to the mark, unhook the fish and compare it to an accurate measuring device. Be advised however, that a prudent angler keeps only fish that are clearly legal as fish can shrink slightly after death. There are no provisions in the regulations that allow for "shrinkage".

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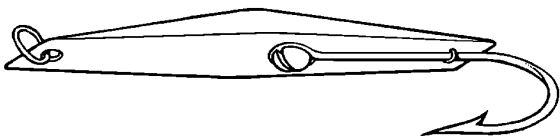
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## 6. Remove hook carefully.

A fish hooked in the forward part of the mouth should not be difficult to release without harm, but one where the hook is deep in the gullet or the gills is another problem. Long-nose pliers, or a medical hemostat, are effective for removing deep hooks while preventing harm to the fish or angler. If you need to release a fish which is deeply hooked with a single bait hook, it is best to cut the line close to the hook and release the fish with the hook in place. Chances are, the fish will survive and the hook will rust or work its way out within a short time.

## 7. Avoid use of treble hooks.

Lures with treble hooks are difficult to remove without damaging the fish in most cases. A truly concerned angler can buy lures with a single hook or replace treble hooks with a single “siwash” style hook which holds a fish well but is easier to remove.



## 8. Use barbless hooks and/or circle hooks.

Another good idea is to make the hook barbless by closing the barb with a pair of pliers. A hook with a flattened barb is not easily shaken out by a fighting fish, but can be removed with little damage to the fish. Using circle hooks helps to minimize deep hooking injuries, as most of the time the hook set will put the circle hook in the corner of the fish’s mouth.

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## IN CONCLUSION

The survival rate of released fish can be greatly improved if the above procedures are followed. Remember, the survival of the undersized fish you release is an important factor in the quality of fishing you may expect in future years. You can take pride in knowing that you are doing your part to ensure the sustainability of our state’s natural resources.

For a complete information on the sport fishing regulations, pick up a copy of the current California Ocean Sport Fishing Regulations booklet and supplements, which are available wherever you buy your fishing license or online at: [www.dfg.ca.gov/mrd](http://www.dfg.ca.gov/mrd) Note: sport fishing regulations may change throughout the year, look for updates.

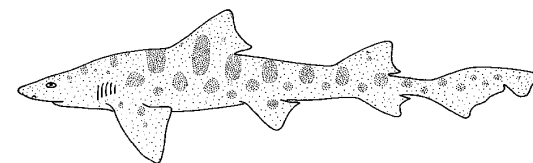
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The Office of Human Resources  
U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
4040 N. Fairfax Drive, Room 300  
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# TIPS FOR RELEASING SALTWATER FISH



Leopard shark  
(*Triakis semifasciata*)



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