

## Words Matter: Call them “Releases”

by CHARLES WITEK



*Charles Witek, from Greenwich CT, has spent over 50 years on the water, and is a well-known author and blogger. Witek said, “I have realized that without strong fisheries laws and effective conservation measures, the future of salt water fishing, and America’s living marine resources, is dim.”*

Language has power.

Although words seem ephemeral, they have the ability to transform anything, even the most seemingly solid and immutable objects, through the power of perception.

### Consider “used car.”

When you first hear those words, it’s not unlikely that you think of some clunker, sitting on a lot amid dozens of its kind, with a price and some sort of come-on phrase luridly painted across its whole windshield. And maybe you think about semi-bald tires, sawdust in the transmission, and maybe a fast-talking, ethically-challenged salesman or two.

You don’t see many folks selling “used cars” any more, at least not many people connected with major dealerships. If you see any at all, it usually involves a small, ill-lighted lot in a disreputable section of town, or an obnoxious ad that blasts through the speakers of your truck’s radio.

On the other hand, you see plenty of folks selling “pre-owned vehicles” these days.

I think that Mercedes might have started that trend, but these days you’ll see pre-owned Fords, Nissans and Hyundais, too. Even though you know, in your head, that they’re all just used cars, essentially no different than what you would have found on the same dealer’s lot a decade ago, down in your gut they seem somehow far better than the “creampuff” you bought, in your youth, from that guy in the plaid suit, who was always chewing on a cheap cigar.

Words can, in such ways, upgrade the mundane.

They can downgrade the virtuous, too.

Unfortunately, for an example of that, we only need to turn to federal fisheries managers, and how they deal with catch and release.

And maybe the first thing we ought to consider is how, and then perhaps, why, they don’t really acknowledge “releases” at all.

### RELEASES VS DISCARDS

Instead, they call them “discards,” tossing them into the same big pot as “regulatory discards,” the undersized, over-limit and out-of-season catch that fishermen might want to keep, but aren’t allowed to by law, and “economic discards,” fish that may be legally kept but, to a commercial fisherman, aren’t worth the time and the trouble—and the hold space—to bring back to the dock.

The shared characteristic of regulatory and economic discards is that folks don’t want to catch them. For commercial fishermen, discards of any sort just take up valuable time on the water that could be better spent catching something with real market value. For anglers, days spent catching shorts and out-of-season, non-target fish are usually not too much fun.

Fish caught by a catch-and-release angler, who heads out on the intending to let everything go, are something essentially different. They are not “discarded.” They are not returned to the water because of legal restrictions or because they are perceived to have little value.

Very much to the contrary, such fish are usually caught during the open fishing season, and are frequently big enough to keep. They are released not because they are worthless, but because they are held in such esteem by the angler that, in the words of the late angler and author Lee Wulff, they are thought, “too valuable to be caught only once.”

Unfortunately, the National Marine Fisheries Service doesn’t see things the same way that anglers do.

I was reminded of that, as I was reading through the just-released *Fisheries of the United States 2017*, NMFS’ annual report to Congress which, in its preliminary comments on the recreational fishery, notes that

“The 2017 U.S. marine recreational fish catch, including fish kept and fish released (discarded) on the Atlantic, Gulf, and Pacific coasts (including Alaska, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico), was an estimated 1 billion fish taken on an estimated 202 million fishing trips...”

While a significant proportion of the fish released probably did represent legitimate regulatory discards, having been undersized, over-limit or out-of-season when caught, a significant portion were also undoubtedly legitimate “releases”—fish that could have been retained by an angler who just preferred to set the fish free.

NMFS’ failure to distinguish between regulatory discards and intentional releases needs to be remedied, because it has real and unfortunate policy consequences.

The most recent, and one of the most unfortunate, is currently unfolding at the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council, which has begun work on what it calls the “[Bluefish Allocation Amendment](#),” a pending amendment to its bluefish management plan that could permanently shift some of the annual allocation from the recreational to the commercial sector.

*Ad hoc* reallocations of bluefish are already permitted under the current management plan, which was last amended in 1998.

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