

# Fish Handling Practices

by Nick Sannicandro



With Spring here and a new fishing season upon us, rather than an opinion article it is most important to remind anglers, or educate new anglers on proper fish handling practices. Improper handling of fish is one of the leading causes of **catch and release mortality** among fish, especially striped bass.

So here are a few helpful hints to reduce the mortality rate of your catch, and to increase the chances that it lives to see another day and grow its population.

## 1. Picture This

One of the first things I was taught as an angler was to **hold your breath once you take the fish out of the water**, because essentially that is what your fish is doing as you hold it out of the water, fumble for your phone, unlock the screen and take your photos.



Prepare in advance to take that fish photo (*On The Water photo*)

time out of water as possible.

But ultimately if you do not need a picture of it, don't take it. **There is no social media award for most schoolies photographed!**

## 2. Proper Handling

As it ties into #1, it is amazing how many anglers handle their fish improperly when posing for photos.

Holding it by the mouth serves to only separate its jaw or permanently disable the fish.

**L a y i n g most species of fish on the ground or rocks removes the protective**



A released striped bass, covered with beach sand has little chance of surviving.

**“slime” coat** that protects the fish from diseases, and may

damage the fish's gills if laid in the sand.

The proper way to hold the fish is one hand near or under the mouth and the other hand supporting the belly of the fish.



Bluefish is one exception...you absolutely do NOT want to have your hand anywhere near the mouth!

## 3. Proper release

It's astonishing how many people just chuck (or even kick) their catch back into the water, summersaulting and crashing into rocks or debris. It goes without saying, that is not a proper release.

In some situations there is no choice (jetties, during storms, high cliffs, etc.) and in that case, well, there's nothing you can do, especially if it puts your own life at risk. But on calm sunny days, whether from boat or shore, one should support the fish under its belly, and slowly glide the fish back and forth in the water to revive it as the water runs through its gills.

A handful of people in the Narragansett area know the story of a tautog that was kept which I took and, after being out of the water for nearly an hour, was able to successfully revive and release incredibly.

## 4. Deep water releases

Boat anglers know that fish caught from deep depths will often be suffering from **barotrauma**. When you see a fish with its swim bladder poking out of its mouth or lower regions having intestines sticking out, that fish is suffering from barotrauma.



This is much the same as when scuba divers who surface too quickly can suffer decompression sickness (the bends).

There are tools that fisherman can use (and that RISAA once graciously gave out to members during a monthly meeting) to properly release these fish so that the effects of barotrauma will be reversed and the fish will survive its release.

Previously, anglers would use a “venting needle” to puncture the fish' swollen bladder, but today there are many types of decending devices which will use a weight that brings the fish to the bottom before the device releases the fish. These devices greatly increase the survival rate when returning deep water fish.

Please look into using these tools rather than just throwing the fish back in.