

Catch and Release in the 21st Century

by CHARLES WITEK



Anglers have long recognized the virtue of releasing some or all of their catch. In 1939, the late Lee Wulff, a noted writer, angler, and conservationist, observed that, “The fish you release is a gift to another angler and remember, it may have been someone’s similar gift to you.”

I was reminded of that yesterday, when a bulky brown envelope appeared in my mail. I knew what it was without even looking at the return address: A message from the National Marine Fisheries Service’s Cooperative Shark Tagging Program, notifying me that one of the sharks that I released had been recaptured.

CATCH, RELEASE AND TAGGED SHARK

I had just tagged some shortfin mako and sandbar sharks a couple of weeks earlier, and assumed that one of them had probably been quickly recaptured. But when I opened the package, it turned out that my gift to another offshore angler had been far nicer than I had originally thought.

A mako that I had tagged exactly four years ago, on August 15, 2017, when it weighed 50 pounds or so and was only a little over four feet long (fork length), was recaptured last June, when it had quadrupled in weight and reached an overall length of more than seven feet.



Although the other angler estimated the fish’s weight at 250 pounds, that was probably a little high—a seven-foot mako should typically weigh around 200—the length estimate was roughly what one would expect for a fish that was a little over 4 feet long when released, and was then at large for nearly 4 years.

I can only hope that the fact that both length and weight were estimated means that the angler did not kill the shark, but instead regifted it to another fisherman somewhere down the line.

More and more recreational shark fishermen are doing so, in part because the tournament craze and the desire to hang big fish on a scale has cooled down from its frenzied peak in the late 1900s, and in part, at least in the case of shortfin makos, because the fish’s steadily declining abundance has led to increasingly restrictive size limits.

I haven’t killed a shark in over 20 years, and haven’t killed a mako since the late 1990s, but even if I had wanted to bring a fish home on that day in 2017, the 52-incher that I released four years ago didn’t quite measure up to the minimum size.

And by the time it was caught again last June, the minimum size for female makos had been increased to 83 inches; since the

fish was estimated to measure 87 inches overall length when recaptured, its fork length probably again fell an inch or two short of the minimum size.

Thus, I hope that it’s still swimming around out there somewhere, so it can mature and, hopefully, help rebuild the stock, so that another angler might, perhaps, encounter it, and so that it can contribute to our knowledge of the species, thanks to an acoustic tag that was implanted by Stony Brook University researchers before it was released four years ago.

CATCH & RELEASE UNDER ATTACK

Many benefits accrue from catch and release fisheries. Unfortunately, catch and release, at least in salt water, is increasingly coming under attack, in part because its popularity is seen as a threat to traditional catch-and-kill fishing, and in part because some anglers who appear to embrace catch-and-release angling do so in a thoughtless manner that causes many fish to die after they’re returned to the water.

The notion that catch-and-release anglers somehow cause harm to catch-and-kill fishermen has become a particularly prominent issue in the striped bass fishery, after the most recent benchmark stock assessment determined that 48% of all striped bass fishing mortality in 2017, the assessment’s terminal year, was attributable to recreational release mortality.

Since that assessment was released, we saw members of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission’s Atlantic Striped Bass Management Board call recreational release mortality,

“the single most important issue [facing striped bass managers] at this time,”

and opine that “addressing [that issue] (or reducing discards) is the most important action that can be taken going forward.”

A report issued by one striped bass work group convened by the Management Board noted that, “Many [work group] members pointed to the fact that recreational discards accounted for just under 50% of the fishing mortality as basis for the critical need to address this issue. Others noted that, particularly in states with primarily catch and release fisheries, the [Management] Board is running out of ways to control removals in the fishery.”

That last comment strays quite far from the truth, as recreational striped bass landings remain robust, accounting for 42% of striped bass mortality in 2017. Fishery managers still have the option of placing greater restrictions on such landings in order to offset whatever release mortality occurs. In states which host “primarily catch and release fisheries,” such restrictions would seem to be a logical way to control removals, and very much in line with what has been done in other marine catch-and-release sport fisheries, including Florida tarpon, Florida snook, and Atlantic billfish, among others.

A chart provided to the Management Board at its August meeting illustrated the fact that high levels of catch-and-release are nothing new in the striped bass fishery. **(to page 23)**