

WITEK: CATCH & RELEASE (from page 30)

“...let’s face it most people just want a picture of themselves of them [sic] holding that monster fish they just caught. Keeping that large of a fish is not always a desirable thing for many anglers.”

It’s a nice idea, and most of the anglers have good intentions, but the unfortunate truth is that cameras kill.

Big striped bass are already stressed when an angler finally brings them to the boat or the beach. There are ways that the stress can be minimized; anglers can employ single-hooked lures and tackle stout enough to beat the fish quickly, and can refrain from fishing when high water temperature and low salinity and/or dissolved oxygen create conditions that make a released fish less likely to survive. But even under the best of conditions, such bass will be suffering from lactic acid buildup, and will be vulnerable to bad handling practices.

Under such circumstances, the worst thing that an angler can do is grab the bass by the jaw (or, even worse, by the gill plate), hold it vertically and stand there smiling while someone looks for, eventually finds, and finally starts using a camera (although yes, we’ve all done that a time or two in our lives). Taking a bass out of the water at all lowers its chance of survival; keeping it out of the water for an extended photo session makes survival even less likely.

Thus, we see the organization **Keep Fish Wet** remind us that “**The Striped Bass Fishery Is in Our Hands,**” and advise,

“Whether you fish from a center console, the beach, a rocky shoreline, a skiff, or a downtown piece of city concrete, these principles will help to make sure that your catch is released safely.

- Minimize Air Exposure. 10 seconds or less is best.
- Eliminate Contact with Dry Surfaces. Wet your hands before touching fish and avoid bringing them into boats.
- Reduce Handling Time. Release fish quickly and only revive fish that cannot swim on their own.”

It’s all good advice and, if practiced regularly, will go a long way to both reduce release mortality and take away arguments from those who want to limit catch-and-release in order to **promote catch-and-kill.**

KILLING SHARKS FOR FUN

Of course, there are some recreational fisheries that are essentially irredeemable, fisheries where catch-and-release is only a screen for glaringly excessive levels of fishing mortality. In that respect, the mid-Atlantic’s surf fishery for protected shark species is particularly heinous.

It came about innocently enough; surf fishermen along much of the coast suffer from the summer doldrums; the decline of striped bass, bluefish, and weakfish populations have made what was always a relatively slow time even worse. Thus, it’s understandable that, when anglers learned that they could catch big sharks and rays from they beach, many began to do so.

The problem is that, especially in the upper mid-Atlantic and southern New England, just about all of the sharks that such anglers catch are either sandbar sharks, sand tigers, or dusky sharks, fish deemed “prohibited species” that must be immediately released when caught and, in some states, aren’t even legal to target. While responsible anglers try to release such sharks without causing appreciable harm, the surf zone is

a stressful place; either the anglers have to wade out to release the sharks, and risk being injured by the fish, or they must drag the shark into the wash and even onto the sand, an effort that is inevitably harmful to the shark, damaging its spinal column (if the fish is dragged by the tail), forcing the weight of the entire fish to press down upon its internal organs (remember that sharks have no supporting skeletal structure), and taking its gills up out of the water.

The sharks’ survival is far from assured.

And that’s even before we consider the **Bozo Factor.**

There’s something about sharks that brings out the worst in people, and makes them want to sit on their backs, bend back their spines, make stupid gestures and say stupid things while their friends take videos of the fish’s teeth.

In one of the more outrageous recent episodes, a couple of Bubbas from West Virginia crawled out of their cave and went down to Florida, where they caught a protected sand tiger shark and proceeded to open a beer can using the living shark’s teeth. Like most fish-abusing idiots, they quickly posted their antics on social media, trying to impress...someone.

Their excuse was that

“It was just a bit of fun.”

Such behavior doesn’t do much for the public image of anglers, and does even less for the health of the fish.

It also provides those who would restrict catch-and-release angling, in order to promote catch-and-kill, ready-made arguments that help them make their point.

If sportfishing is to survive well into the 21st Century, as human populations increase, the climate shifts, and fish populations come under more stress, catch-and-release angling is going to have to play an ever-larger role.

But if catch-and-release angling is going to remain a viable option in the public’s eye, anglers are going to have to take responsibility to assure that it’s done right, minimizing the stress on the fish, maximizing the chances of released fish’s survival, while also maximizing the likelihood that angling, itself, will survive.

As Gifford Pinchot, first head of the U.S. Forest Service, observed more than eighty years ago,

“We love the search for fish and the finding, the tense eagerness before the strike and the tenser excitement afterward; the long hard fight, searching the heart, testing the body and soul; and the supreme moment when the glorious creature, fresh risen from the depths of the sea, floats to your hand and then, the hook removed, sinks with a gently motion back from whence it came, to live and fight another day.”

Intentionally killing a fish is a poor anticlimax to such an experience; unintentionally killing, when such killing could be avoided, is both a tragedy and a disgrace.

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.”