



The Art of Catch-and-Release Fishing: What Anglers Need to Know

Catch-and-release fishing has been an important part of recreational angling for many decades, but the practice has approached critical mass in recent years. As anglers have come to value many fish species more for their sporting qualities than as table fare – including [trout, bass, and muskellunge](#) – catch-and-release angling has grown immensely in popularity. With the addition of catch-and-release only seasons and no-kill waters ([2011 Michigan Fishing Guide](#), pages 7-13), anglers fishing those waters have to practice catch-and-release if they want to enjoy some of the best fishing opportunities available in Michigan.

The purpose of catch-and-release angling is to allow fish to survive so anglers can catch them again or so the fish can live to reproduce. By taking a few simple steps to ensure fish are released properly, anglers can maximize survival *and* improve fishing.

Sport-caught fish typically die for one of two reasons during catch-and-release: wounding and/or stress. Although some wounding may be unavoidable, the use of proper equipment and careful handling can keep this to a minimum. The following tips showcase what anglers can do to be successful at catch-and-release with success equating to survival.

Hooks

Single hooks are more easily removed than multi-point hooks, such as trebles. In addition, barbless hooks can be more easily removed from fish and cause smaller puncture wounds. Small hooks can be rendered barbless simply by crushing the barb with a pair of pliers. Barbs can be removed from larger hooks with files or side-cutters.

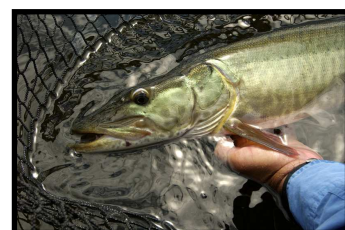


Fish caught in the lips, jaws, mouth roofs or cheeks are more easily released than those that are more deeply hooked – say in the gullet or in the gills. Anglers who use artificial lures generally hook fish more superficially than those using live bait – when a fish takes bait, it may swallow it immediately which can lead to gut- or gill-hooking. If a fish has swallowed a hook, cut the line and leave it. The hook will generally deteriorate over time and the fish has a better chance of survival than if its organs are torn in the unhooking process.

Hooks should be removed quickly; needle-nose pliers or hemostats allow anglers to release fish with minimal handling. Simply grasp the hook with the tool, hold the fish in or over the water, and twist the hook to remove it.

Landing

In many cases, it is better to not net fish that are going to be



released. An alternative is to bring the fish up to the side of the boat, grasp the hook, and shake it free while the fish is still in the water. Some fish, such as bass, are easily handled by the lips. Toothy fish – such as [pike, muskellunge, or trout](#) – can perforate your thumb if you try to grasp them by the mouth. If you use a landing net, make sure it is large enough to capture the fish without battering it with the net frame. Neoprene rubber net baskets are easier on the fish than traditional twine baskets.

Handling

If you wish to photograph the fish before you release it, please handle it carefully. Wet your hands before handling a fish to prevent removing the protective mucus (aka slime) from the fish. Make sure you support the fish properly while holding it; do not squeeze the fish. For larger fish, gloves may help you hold on to them while removing the hook. Do not let the fish batter itself against the boat or the ground.

Other Tips

Stress is caused by a variety of factors, including taking too long to land a fish or catching a fish during periods of warm water temperatures (particularly cold water species like salmon or steelhead). Make sure you use line of sufficient test-strength so you do not have to prolong the fight. Bring the fish in to shore or to your boat directly and release it quickly.

Please note, fish caught from deep water will often die unless they are brought to the surface slowly.

When releasing a fish, slide it gently back into the water. If the fish appears stressed, hold it in the water and gently move it back and forth to force water through the gills.

This will help to revitalize it. If you are in a river, face the fish into the current – but avoid extremely fast-moving water.



In some cases, if fish are badly hooked (for instance, in the gills) or are obviously stressed, you may not be able to successfully release them. However, in many cases – such as during closed seasons or with fish that do not measure more than the minimum length required – you must release them anyway.

For more information on fishing in Michigan, visit www.michigan.gov/fishing.

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