

Nine Ways To Reduce Fish Mortality

Have you ever noticed that some of the larger fish have discolored patches on their bodies, possibly due to having their protective mucous rubbed off during an earlier catch-and-release? A thrashing, wriggling, wildly flopping around fish can be difficult to unhook without causing harm. Releasing it in a way that maximizes its potential to survive and flourish requires as much skill as catching the fish. Gary Lafontaine suggests cupping the fish in your hand so that you do not touch its very sensitive lateral line as a way to minimize its thrashing about while you unhook it. In addition, the following suggestions from the FFF are good ones to follow:

1. Do not fight your fish to exhaustion.

Use the leader and rod to get your fish landed. Even with light gear, “hustle” your fish in. Cold water fish in warm conditions often die if exhausted. Consider cutting the line if you can’t land the fish quickly.

2. Land your fish carefully.

When in the boat, float tube, or for large fish, use a net to reduce time. Because net fibers (especially nylon) can damage eyes and remove protective slime from a fish’s body, small fish should be landed by hand. Do not allow a fish to flop in shallow water or on the rocks, but do not drag a fish with its mouth open.

3. Handle your fish carefully.

Minimize the time any fish is out of the water. The longer a fish is out of the water, the greater the chance it will die. Ideally keep your fish in the water, especially large fish, where lifting and handling could lead to injury. Keep your fingers out of the gills and eyes of any fish and never squeeze fish throat or body cavity regions; vital organs may be fatally injured. Stomach pumps to determine the fish’s feeding habit are not recommended for most anglers.

4. Use barbless hooks.

With barbless hooks, it is easier on the fish and there is less tissue damage. For larger fish (like steelhead), barbless hooks are especially important. Use needle nose pliers or forceps to bend down barbs.

5. Use bronzed hooks.

Bronzed, instead of nickel, stainless steel or gold-plated hooks dissolve if left in fish. If you break a fish off, or cut the leader when a fish has been hooked deeply, bronzed hooks will corrode/dissolve more quickly.

6. Get a catch and release tool.

To release a fish without touching it, get an inexpensive device called a catch & release tool. Basically a cup hook is attached to the end of a wooden dowel handle. You grab the line about 18 inches from the hooked fish and the tool slides the hook down to the lure or fly. By pulling upward on the bend of the hook, it is disengaged and the fish goes free, without being touched or even removed from the water.

7. Record your trophy with care.

If you wish to photograph a fish, do it quickly. Ideally get someone else to take the picture or hold the fish. Keep the fish in the water by cradling it, or by keeping it in a net beneath the water. If you weigh a fish, the best way is to weigh the fish in a net.

8. Release your fish correctly.

Never “throw” a fish back. Gently return it to low velocity, shallow water; particularly after a prolonged fight. If you release the fish in shallow water, you can recover it if it is not able to swim.

9. Revive your fish if necessary.

Revive an exhausted fish by pointing its head into slow current until the gills are working normally and the fish gains enough strength to support itself. Continue until the fish is able to swim away. The fish will often surge out of your hands when recovered. If the fish seems disoriented, sometimes a slight push with the rod tip or pole will stimulate it to move off.