A fish can be revived by moving it gently back and forth in the water. An angler should wet his hands before handling the fish to avoid damaging its mucous covering.

The puppy drum was a gift, a glistening copper and white prize from the upper reaches of a Hyde County creek that had surrendered few fish this October day. In only a couple of feet of water, the drum had committed hit-and-run on a quarter-ounce gold spoon, first surging away and then charging the boat when I tried to apply the brakes with a lightweight spinning outfit.

After one lap around the boat and another dash toward the shore, the fight ended. It wasn’t a big drum—about 5 pounds or so—but it was a good fish, one to be appreciated on a day when only a few pumpkinseeds had shown an inclination to bite in a stretch of blackwater that, because of drought, was much more saline than usual. Largemouth bass are usually abundant here, but the only one I’d seen was floating dead with several lesions on its body. The rest of them, I hoped, had high-tailed it for fresher water farther up the creek.

Novelist and outdoor writer Zane Grey once wrote that “To capture the fish is not all of the fishing. Yet there are circumstances which make this philosophy hard to accept.” After several fruitless hours, I had reached that point.

Not only was the drum a good fish, but it had been well hooked in its bottom lip and I had managed to tie a decent knot in 8-pound line that seems wispier and more difficult to see than it did 20 years ago. After a couple of quick photos, with the drum supported horizontally in my hands wet with creek water, I released the fish and it darted away, vanishing into the shallows. I don’t recall what I was thinking, but I might have mentally patted myself on the back for having returned this fish to the creek in good shape.

CATCH-AND-RELEASE FISHING CAN BE A MANAGEMENT TOOL, CONSERVATION ETHIC OR DOGMA. BUT DOES IT DELIVER ALL IT PROMISES?

Written by Jim Wilson
Illustrated by Gary Palmer

Letting Go
I might have been a bit hasty, for as anglers we never truly know whether a fish we release lives or dies. Odds are that fish was fine. It was exposed to air for less than a minute, and I put it back in the water to remove the hook. Why the pictures? When you’re fishing with a professional photographer and he wants to record your catch, it’s a no-brainer. I rarely keep fish anymore. That’s not a philosophical decision born of some political correctness—or corrected—view that fish should never be killed. If an angler wants to keep fish, let him keep them—as long as they are a legal catch and he intends to use them. (Killing fish such as tarpon and false albacore, which have minimal or no table value, does seem pointless.)

My fondness for catch-and-release probably originated more from laziness than logic. If you don’t kill a fish, you don’t have to clean it. That seems the most clear-cut difference between hunting with a rod and reel and hunting with a gun. However, fishing with the intent of releasing every fish does change the role of fisherman as predator into fisherman as practitioner of a skill. Still, I’d much rather catch fish than eat them. (I’ve never eaten a game animal that I didn’t like. I’ve never tried possum, but I’m guessing the flavor would be the four-legged equivalent of bowfin.)

ORIGINS OF AN IDEA

That aside, catch-and-release is a sensible, practical approach to having more fish available to catch. It emphasizes the recreational rather than the consumptive value of fish. Those notions were at the heart of the origins of catch-and-release. In the 1870s, anglers on the Penobscot River in Maine, faced with the need to clean it. That seems the most clear-cut difference between hunting with a rod and reel and hunting with a gun. However, fishing with the intent of releasing every fish does change the role of fisherman as predator into fisherman as practitioner of a skill. Still, I’d much rather catch fish than eat them. (I’ve never eaten a game animal that I didn’t like. I’ve never tried possum, but I’m guessing the flavor would be the four-legged equivalent of bowfin.)

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The benefits of survival for wild fish are several. Fish continue to spawn, they prey on other fish, they become prey themselves and perhaps are caught again by anglers. Although most fish do survive release, there are situations when a significant percentage will not. In addition, there are sublethal or delayed effects, the scope of which biologists are still trying to determine.

The factors that lead to mortality of released fish are many and include water temperature, time played, time out of the water, handling, whether natural or artificial bait was used, water depth at hooking and hooking location. Those factors appear to be more critical to some species than to others. How - ever, fishermen can minimize the adverse effects of many of these variables.

Our striped bass fishery, whether in the ocean, rivers or impoundments, also involves a large voluntary catch-and-release component. These factors make Morone saxatilis an excellent example of issues involving the release of fish.

On the Atlantic coast, from the northeastern United States to Cape Hatteras, striped bass are a premier sport fish, attracting millions of saltwater anglers each year. Along the entire coast, anglers in 2000 landed almost 29 million striped bass, and released about 91 percent of them, or 26 million. The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission figures an annual release mortality rate of 8 percent for striped bass. For the East Coast, that additional mortality represents about another 6.4 percent for released fish. That higher rate of mortality is especially critical to some species; that’s what they are adapted to,” he said. “They’re not really a warmwater fish. Species such as striped bass, largemouth bass, walleye and many panfish are more susceptible to these issues than are trout, chain pickerel or muskellunge, which can make pressure adjustments more quickly.

“Game fish are too valuable to be caught only once.”

—Lee Wulff, 1939
CIRCULAR SOLUTIONS

Not only does bait type play a role in hooking location, so does hook type. Fish landed with J-hooks tend to be deep-hooked more often than those landed on non-offset circle hooks. Overall, circle hooks have been shown to be effective in comparison to J-hooks at reducing mortality. Biologists Steven Cooke and Cory Sussle found in a review of circle hook literature (43 studies involving 23 species) that non-offset circle hooks reduced hooking mortality by about 30 percent, but the percentage varied among species.

Circle hooks are used almost exclusively with live bait and soft plastics. Some manufacturers use live bait to use barbless non-offset circle hooks. On the Roanoke, many anglers will fish with live bait and continue to fish for striped bass, practicing catch-and-release. Some estimates are that individual anglers catch and release more than 100 stripers or more per trip. Natural bait is used most often during this season, thus ensuring some release mortality, perhaps a significant amount. When the harvest season closes, usually at the end of April, anglers may continue to fish for striped bass under no-take restrictions. During May of 2006, the commission’s creel survey showed that more than 24,700 stripers were caught and released on the river.

Nelson cited this catch-and-release fishery as an example of one that developed as a result of new angling restrictions. The restoration of the striped bass from its low point in the 1980s to its current status is one of the best-known fisheries management success stories. The Roanoke River/Albemarle Sound striped bass population rebounded from a low of about 180,000 fish to approximately 2 million today. The catch-and-release fishery flourished on the Roanoke after harvest restrictions were implemented in 1991 to restore this dwindling anadromous population, Nelson said. “The end of the harvest season frequently occurred just as striped bass catch rates began to peak in the upper river. Quality catch-and-release fishing resulted. In this case the population has rebounded despite catch-and-release mortality, as well as significant levels of commercial discard mortality from gill net fisheries in the Albemarle Sound. In the case of the Roanoke River, catch-and-release and commercial discard mortality are estimated and included in the population model which helps determine acceptable levels of harvest.” For those many fish that have been played to exhaustion. In one brook trout study, fish chased over 60 seconds or less did not experience any difficulty swimming. Air exposure of two minutes, however, resulted in about a 75 percent reduction in swimming performance, leaving the fish vulnerable to predation.

If you must boat a fish, cover its eyes with a wet cloth to calm it. If a large fish is held for a photo, hold it horizontally to support its body. Keep your fish in the water while unhooking it. Prolonged handling time. Fish played to exhaustion take longer to recover.

Use tackle strong enough to land fish quickly and reduce playing time. Fish played to exhaustion take longer to recover.

If using live bait for large species such as striped bass or red drum, use barbless non-offset circle hooks.

Use artificial lures to reduce deep hooking.

The use of barbless hooks and single hooks instead of trebles makes dehooking easier and reduces handling time.

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