Ethical Angling

"An ethical angler uses tackle and techniques which minimize harm to fish when engaging in catch-and-release angling."
-U.S. Code of Angling Ethics

NOAA Fisheries and angling constituency groups adopted the U.S. Code of Angling Ethics in 1999. The code promotes ethical behavior in the use of aquatic resources, and respect for the aquatic environment and all living things in it.

Practicing careful catch and release is important because it can drastically decrease the number of fish that die after being released. For example, a 2016 study by Dr. John Graves and others from the Virginia Institute of Marine Science showed that by simply not removing the fish the from the water, white marlin mortality after release could fall from 33.3% to 1.7%.

Every fish released alive and in good condition moves the nation one step closer to the goal of maintaining sustainable fisheries.

Photo credits:
NOAA (above) | J Graves (cover) | E Orbesen (inside left)
K Davis (inside center) | A Jackson (inside right)

Atlantic Highly Migratory Species

Atlantic highly migratory species (HMS) are tunas, sharks, billfishes, and swordfish. These species are federally-managed in the U.S. Atlantic, Caribbean, and Gulf of Mexico.

Fishing Regulations

Atlantic HMS fishing regulations and compliance guides are available at:

http://go.usa.gov/3qjTH
1-301-427-8503

Fishing Permits

Federal vessel fishing permits are required to lawfully fish for Atlantic HMS and are available at:

https://hmspermits.noaa.gov
1-888-872-8862

Tagging Programs

NMFS Cooperative Shark Tagging Program:

http://go.usa.gov/3qvX9
1-401-782-3320

Cooperative Tagging Center (tunas and billfishes):

http://go.usa.gov/3qvRk
tagging@noaa.gov
1-800-437-3936

NOAA FISHERIES

Atlantic HMS Management Division
1315 East West Highway
Silver Spring, Maryland 20910
www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/hms

Careful Catch and Release

Helping large pelagic fish survive to fight another day

NOAA FISHERIES

Do not remove the fish from the water... even for a picture!

Keep the fish in the water, boatside, while safely removing the hook.

Gravity above the water's surface exerts great stress on the fish and lowers its chance of survival after release.

Rig a measuring device so the fish can be measured in the water.

For example, mark a pole, leader and float, or the gunwale of the boat with measurements for the legal retention size.

Do not gaff the fish in the body.

Use a lip gaff in the front lower jaw, or a snooter for billfishes (pictured above).

Use circle hooks and dehooking devices.

Research shows that non-offset circle hooks are less likely to hook a highly migratory species in the throat or gut than J-hooks. Instead, non-offset circle hooks more often set in the jaw or the corner of the mouth, making removal more accessible and less harmful to the fish.

Use of non-offset circle hooks also reduces the risk of catching and fatally injuring sea turtles.

You MUST use non-offset circle hooks when:

1. Participating in any billfish (marlin, spearfish, or sailfish) tournament and using natural bait.
2. Recreationally fishing for sharks south of 41°43' N latitude (near Chatham, MA), except when fishing with flies or artificial lures.

If you cannot safely remove the hook, cut the leader as short as possible.

Use corrodible, non-stainless hooks in case the leader must be cut or the line breaks. A non-stainless hook remaining in a fish will corrode at a faster rate.

Reduce the fight time.

Playing a fish to exhaustion depletes its energy reserves and causes lactic acid to build up in its tissues, which can add to stress and contribute to death. Using heavier tackle is a good way to reduce fight time.

Plan Ahead

Bring dehooking devices and safe handling gear for the trip, and discuss handling and release procedures with your fishing party.

Help revive the fish by slowly towing it in the water until its color or energy returns (5 minutes or more).

Most highly migratory species must keep water flowing over their gills to breathe. With the boat in gear, slowly move forward while keeping the fish's head in the water.

Signs of a revived billfish are changing color from bronze to silver, swimming actively, and closing and opening its bottom jaw. Sharks and tunas will also swim more actively once they've had a chance to recover.

Federal Regulations at 50 CFR 635.21(a)(1):

An Atlantic highly migratory species... that is not retained must be released in a manner that will ensure maximum probability of survival, but without removing the fish from the water.

See Federal Regulations at:

50 CFR 635.21(f) for information on regulations related to billfish tournaments and shark fishing circle hook requirements