Fishing on Charleston

Catch and Release Tips

“Many people go fishing all their lives without knowing it is not the fish they are after.” *Henry David Thoreau*

While there is nothing wrong with catching and taking fish from the lake to have a meal at the cottage, catch and release fishing is increasingly becoming the norm for many fishermen. The following are some tips for insuring that your catch makes it back into the water safely for another angler or generation to pursue.

1. Handling fish - Wet your hands if you need to handle a fish - fish have a natural (and smelly!) layer of slime which protects them from fungus, bacteria and parasites. Dry hands are much more likely to remove a fish's protective layer of slim. Remember, never touch a fish’s gills or eyes if you are planning on releasing.
2. Landing fish – Keep them in the water as much as possible, only removing them when necessary for a few seconds at a time. If you feel you must take it out of the water, don’t hold a fish with one hand by its lower lip – support the belly with your other hand. Keep admiration and photo time (try shooting them in the water) to a minimum to avoid exposure to air.
3. Landing nets - using a net increases the risk of injury or mortality so releasing in the water without a net is the best approach when that is possible. If not, a rubber knotless net lessens injury to fins and the removal of the protective slime. Large mesh allows for quicker removal of hooks.
4. Hooks – single, barbless circle hooks are the best as they minimize the chance of deep hooking. Another option is to simply use needle nose pliers to flatten the barbs on your hooks to minimize the tissue damage that barbs inevitably create when fish thrash and in hook removal. Barbless hooks usually reduce the release time and often fish can be released without taking them out of the water at all. Trailing treble hooks often snare the gills or eyes. Trebles can be removed or replaced by a large single hook. While slightly more difficult to land a fish with barbless hooks, it can be a fun challenge to your angling skills (keeping line tight at all times etc.) if you are going to release anyway.
5. If the hook is buried deep and cannot be retrieved easily, cut the line as close to the hook as possible. One study found that approximately two thirds of fish survived with the hook still in the fish while only 11% survived when the angler tried to do deep surgery. *(reference: Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission).*
6. Adverse conditions such as water temperature greater than 65 to 70 degrees, require extra care in handling fish.
7. Avoid unnecessarily long landing battles (except when releasing trout – see below). Use slightly heavier gear to keep the fight short.
8. Swim bladder – when most fish (bass, pickerel, perch) are caught in deep water and brought to the surface, gasses dissolved in the blood are released causing the bladder to expand, often causing internal damage. Fortunately, for lake trout this is not the case as they have the ability to inflate and deflate their swim bladders to compensate for changes in water pressure at different depths. Even if you see air bubbles surfacing or the fish burping/gurgling, it is the trout’s way of reducing the pressure and they can still be safely released. They do not need to be ‘fizzed’. As opposed to bass and pike where you want the fight to be relatively fast and short, bringing trout up slowly is the preferred method as it gives the trout enough time to complete the pressure adjustment process. *(reference: Outdoor Canada Magazine)*
9. Revival – if the fish is struggling, hold it gently in the water and look for the gills to open and close – use a gentle figure eight pattern when moving water through the gills, not in a straight line as this impedes the fish’s ability to move water from the mouth to the gills.
10. Take your frayed line home to the trash bucket – throwing it back into the lake can endanger fish, loons and other wildlife.
11. Bait or artificial lures? - Using live bait often results in hooks being ingested deeply rather than in the lip where lures generally latch.
12. Large Lake trout are less resilient than small trout, so be extra careful with them.
13. Large mouth and small mouth bass caught and released early in the season (or before the season opens) results in reduced ability to protect their young against predators after being caught while defending their nests.

*(Reference: JP Bushey, Ontario Out of Doors, June 2016)*

Catch and release doesn’t always work - 16 % of fish die after catch and release (but it sure is better than 100% the other way!) *For further information, see the 2005 MNR article: Casselman, S. J. 2005. Catch-and-release angling: a review with guidelines for proper fish handling practices. Fish & Wildlife Branch. Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources. Peterborough, Ontario. 26 p.*

Benefits of Catch and release – besides the obvious benefit of helping maintain a healthy fish population in the lake for the next generation to enjoy, I find the main benefit is being able to tell even bigger whoppers when you get back to the cottage – “that seven-pound monster didn’t get away on its own, I let it go!”

“Fishermen are born honest, but they get over it.” *Ed Zern*