



## ***CATCH AND RELEASE FISHING***

### ***Policy:***

**As part of recreational access to the Common Property resource, Recfishwest supports responsible catch and release fishing as part of the legislative and research requirements and the legitimate aspirations of recreational fishers where fish can safely be returned to the water with high levels of survival.**

Increasing restrictions on recreational fishers has resulted in more fish being released as a result of incidental or bycatch and catch in excess of prescribed bag limits. An increasing number of anglers are also choosing a conservation approach to angling and releasing all or part of their catch. It is important therefore to consider carefully any fishing activity which may increase the need to release fish in water deeper than twenty metres.

Recfishwest supports catch and release fishing where associated incidental mortality can be minimized through careful handling and use of release weights and other appropriate techniques.

Recfishwest will continue to develop strategies that reduce incidental mortality in all its forms. Recfishwest will take a lead role in promoting good practises through education and encourages recreational fishers to fish in such a way that increases the survival of all released fish.

Recfishwest continues to promote a set of careful fishing practises to minimise the risk of harm to captured fish and describes best practice handling and release procedures that increase the survival of released fish.

Recfishwest believes that fish destined to be released should be captured as quickly as possible, handled as little as possible and released using the best available methods to increase the likelihood of survival.

It is recognised that with some species mortality increases with depth as a result of barotrauma and this should be considered as part of a responsible approach to fishing. Releasing some demersal species in water deeper than 20 metres can result in significant mortality, whereas with the use of a release weight overall mortality

can be reduced. Mortality of pelagic species is generally below 5% and therefore is a less significant problem. It is important therefore to consider carefully any fishing activity which may increase the need to release fish in water deeper than twenty metres, or less, for some very vulnerable species.

Recfishwest encourages fishers to not pursue vulnerable demersal catch and release targets in deep water, but if doing so, when demersal bag limits are close to being achieved, fisher's efforts should be redirected to inshore waters and pelagic species.

### **Incidental mortality in fishing:**

An issue which needs to be addressed is that all fishers, irrespective of their motivation and retained catch, must acknowledge that they have an impact on the resource. It is that impact on the resource which must be managed, as well as meeting the sometimes differing aspirations of individual anglers.

When fishing with a hook on a line there is always a chance of catching a fish which cannot be kept due to regulations. Such fish may be illegal because they belong to a protected species, are too small or too large or you already have the bag limit in your possession. In such cases the fish must be returned to the water.

The legal situation is clear. Whether the fish is alive or dead, or regardless of whether it will survive, it must be returned. However, if the fish dies it contributes to incidental mortality and even though it will not be counted in the catch/keep estimates it will ultimately affect the estimate of fishing mortality and the stock status so that in the end it will affect the future allowable catch.

An angler who catches and keeps one legal sized fish and then stops fishing has a total impact of one fish. An angler who catches and releases 40 fish, with an incidental mortality of around 3%, has had a net mortality of 1.2 fish which is greater, even though they may feel that they have had no impact as they let all their fish go. Fisheries managers now apply an incidental mortality rate to released demersal species and future allocations will be based upon the combined impact of both of these fishing activities.

### **Background:**

Recfishwest recognises that people release fish for a variety of reasons; because they are required to do so according to legislated bag or size limits; because the fish is an incidental by-catch or not suitable or desirable to eat; or because they wish to be able to capture that fish in the future.

An increasing number of recreational fishers choose to release fish that they could otherwise retain. Research shows that in many cases, especially in shallow water, the incidental mortality is very low. Many catch and release proponents choose to fish with fishing gear which reduces mortality issues.

A more recent development is the release of larger specimens by some thoughtful fishers to maintain the spawning capacity of key species.

Recreational fishing as an important activity has changed dramatically over the last 15 years. As available leisure time increases, activities such as recreational fishing have also increased in popularity. The community benefits of recreational fishing as an integral part of the Western Australian health and well being is being increasingly recognised.

Recreational fishers have long recognised the need for management controls. Since 1990, when the first major review of recreational fishing was undertaken, there have been several major reviews of recreational line fishing practices alone. In all cases the recreational sector has supported management measures designed to protect and maintain key species as appropriate stock levels.

Whereas previously recreational fishing was primarily motivated by the desire to catch sufficient fish to feed oneself and family, many fishers are motivated by the desire to relax or enjoy the company of friends. The national recreational and indigenous fishing survey (2003) listed the three main reasons for going fishing as - relax and unwind (28%), to be with family (20%) and to fish for sport (18%). Only 11% (equal 4th) rated fishing for food as their main motivation for going fishing.

Recreational fishers are also driving increasingly complex management rules such as maximum size limits or seasonal closures which require increasing understanding of the need to catch, handle and release larger fish in a way that maximises the likelihood of survival. These rules are necessary to ensure that the resource is not over-exploited, can be shared amongst more anglers and recognises the increasing importance on the value of large fish within a population.

### **Catch and release fishing:**

An increasing number of recreational fishers choose to release fish that they could otherwise retain. Research shows that in many cases, especially in shallow water, the incidental mortality is very low. Many catch and release proponents choose to fish with fishing gear which reduces mortality issues.

Rather than worry about the motivation of individual anglers, Recfishwest will continue to develop strategies that reduce incidental mortality in all its forms.

Some types of catch and release fishing include:

- Game fishing is mostly for catch and release, and provides a significant level of recreational and economic activity from an extraordinarily small impact on a fish resource. Most fish are tagged and released as part of angler and government funded research programs. Much of the scientific information on movement and growth of these species has been derived from these research programs, some of which have had commercial fishing implications. It must be acknowledged that there

is an impact on the resource through some incidental mortality, although this is known to be extremely low. Game fishing however, has evolved a set of performance criteria based upon strike rates or hits which, by definition provide a very conservative catch rate relative to more traditional commercial fisheries management strategies.

- Catch and release sport fishing is practised by anglers who catch fish for recreation, while keeping none or a few, to take and eat. This can be done in a remote locality which provides excellent fishing or in heavily fished areas where taking each fish caught could have an impact on the stocks and fishing quality. One motivation is to enjoy the availability or abundance of fish while having less impact on it.
- Where a proportion of the fish are undersized or unwanted they would have to be returned to the water and the total mortality of these fish will ultimately be included in the overall mortality and reducing this impact should benefit future sustainability. Recfishwest continues to take a lead role in promoting good practise through education.
- When anglers continue to fish and release any fish in excess of the current bag limits, the total mortality continues to increase through released fish and is discouraged.
- Organisers of fishing competitions are strongly encouraged to manage the total mortality, the quality of the catch and encourage participation rather than offer total kill based prizes. Recfishwest will continue to work with competition organisers to ensure that their practices do not reflect adversely on the wider recreational fishing community.

Guidelines to minimise injury to fish:

The following guidelines will minimise injury and incidental mortality of any catch over and above prescribed bag and size limits, and protected species;

- Anglers should move from areas where there are large numbers of undersized or unwanted species.
- If bag limits have been reached stop fishing or move to new areas and change target species.
- Always use a release weigh when fishing in water deeper than 20 metres.
- Single (not ganged) hooks should be used where possible.
- Hooks should have crushed barbs or be barbless.
- Hooks should be appropriate to the size of the fish being targeted.

- Circle hooks with no offset are proven to reduce deep hooking rates and should be used where possible.
- Fishing lines should be strong enough to capture the fish quickly without exhausting it, which can cause lactic acid build-up.
- Fish should be able to be landed carefully. Fishing from high cliffs is an example requiring special consideration of the difficulties of releasing fish.
- Knotless landing nets should be used to protect fins, scales, skin, eyes and slime.
- Correct minimal handling and lifting practices should be used to avoid damage to fish.
- Holding tanks for live fish should have sufficient water flow and aeration to maintain water quality similar to the natural environment of the fish caught.

#### **Ethical considerations:**

Recfishwest believes that we are justified in opposing most of the most radical views attributing human behaviours to fish. There is no evidence that fish have imagination or self-consciousness. Studies to date indicate that fish do not feel pain in the same way as humans. To be more specific we can consider the impact of hooks in the mouth of a fish. Most of the fish sought by anglers are higher order predators and are regularly accustomed to grabbing things in their mouth that have spines, spikes, shells and other "uncomfortable" characteristics.

Recreational fishers agree, by common sense as well as national and international obligation, that we must not endanger the species for which we fish. Further than this we should not reduce its abundance below a certain prescribed level agreed by scientific and stakeholder consultation.

Any fish that is taken diminishes the resource for the other "users", which could be marine animals, seabirds, indigenous, commercial or recreational fishers, or people snorkelling and looking. Although recreational fishers have accepted that we can take fish within the community's rules we should not waste them unnecessarily. The practice of catching fish and leaving it to deteriorate in quality such that it must be discarded can no longer be accepted.

This issue of incidental mortality as a result of our fishing activity is one that needs careful consideration and should be minimised. It will never be possible to eliminate incidental mortality but good release practices should be adopted and promoted widely and research programs should continue to work to improve survival of fish released by statute or choice.

Humans have been catching fish to eat since prehistoric times. This has an important cultural value, it has practical dietary value, and it maintains our traditional links with our original subsistence mode of living. The activity of fishing promotes mental and physical health.

Fishery management is concerned primarily with sustainability, and is also concerned with equity. This is more evident in commercial fisheries whereas in recreational fisheries a few fishers catch a large proportion of the fish.