Handling Fish – Best Practice

How we handle our fish is very important. Especially when we intend to release the fish and want them to live and help restore our inshore fishery. More of us are realising that it is no longer a case of ‘plenty more fish in the sea’ but rather a case of ‘every fish counts’.

Before you start fishing, file or flatten down the barbs on your hook. This makes it easier to leave the fish in the water and flick it off the hook. This significantly reduces the amount of holding or handling required to unhook the fish. Barbless hooks also aid in removing hooks from fingers and other body parts, which the fisher will be very grateful for.

There is a hierarchy of best practice when releasing fish. Firstly, avoid handling of the fish by keeping the fish in the water and removing the hook with a pair of pliers. If conditions prevent the safe release of the fish because of a rocking boat or it is difficult to reach the fish in the water, lifting the fish out of the water to use the pliers is the next step. This works well for small or undersized fish. If this is not practical or it is a larger fish, then using a rubber mesh net (while in the water) to hold the fish for release is preferable.

If you must handle the fish prior to release please don’t use a wet cloth or sponge. The material can easily remove the protective mucus and make the fish susceptible to infection and mortality. Wet hands are the preferred way to handle your fish, while it is in the net or on a cool wet surface. The fish may swim away strongly but still die later, if it’s mucus has been removed and infection sets in. Use the towel on your hands afterwards of course.

Rock or beach fishing present different challenges as fish are often dragged up onto rocks or sand and scratch the fish, removing not only mucus but scales and skin as well.

Swinging the fish into your hands and avoiding contact with land is the best option. Using a long (3 metre) rod helps to keep the fisher safe from the ocean swell and helps to get the fish into the fisher’s hands for release. Sometimes there is a rock pool available that can be used for preparing a larger fish for release after photos. Letting it revive and taking photos quickly before carefully releasing back into the water is a good approach.

If you are taking photos of a fish before release don’t hold it by the tail, instead, support the fish’s body with one hand under the head and another near the stomach. Avoid any fingers in the gills or eyes.

If you happen to catch a fish that is undersized and has swallowed the hook, cut the line as close to the mouth as possible and release it back into the water. It is best to keep all legal sized fish that you land instead of releasing them in the hope of catching a big one. Lastly, avoid using stainless steel hooks as they take years to rust out if the fish escapes with the hook still attached.