

Insider Info

PRIME TIME FOR FISHING

As you head out on the water to cast a line, here's what you need to know to help keep yourself — and the fish — alive. BY LISA DENSMORE



RELEASING FISH

How to let 'em go with the best chance of survival

It starts with a couple of tugs. The first one by the fish as it takes the bait, lure, or fly, and the second by the angler as he sets the hook. Adrenaline kicks in, and the action begins. Soon it's decision time. Keep it or let it go? Sport anglers release about 90 percent of the fish they catch because the fish are not a legal species or size or because of lack of desire to eat them. But many freed fish die anyway.

"You may release it and watch it swim away only for it to go belly up downstream," says Mark Beaushesne, who coordinates fishing programs for the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department. A life-long angler, Beaushesne has been guiding and teaching fishing to all types of anglers for two decades.

"You can reduce the risk by playing the fish as little as possible rather than to exhaustion, so less lactic acid builds up," advises Beaushesne. "Wet your hands or use a release glove. Cradle the fish in the water. Gently back out the hook, and then allow the fish to swim away."

Beaushesne recommends having a release tool, such as pliers or hemostats (clamps), within reach and ready to use. He also urges anglers to keep fish in the water as much as possible, even when using a net. A knotless or rubber net — which lowers the chance of entanglement, thus allowing a quicker release — is best.

For warm water species such as bass and pike, Beaushesne often uses a lip-gripper tool but warns not to let the fish dangle long. "You're holding the fish at a small point," he says. "You don't want all of its weight hanging on that one point."

What about a photo? "Make sure the photographer is ready, not fiddling with exposure or other settings, before the fish comes to hand," says Beaushesne. "Remove the hook and let the fish lie in a net in the water so it's not stressed. Pick it up with wet hands for the shot, then release it. The whole process should take seconds."

Most importantly, Beaushesne urges anglers to have a release plan before hooking the fish. "The biggest mistake is not being ready," says Beaushesne. "The second biggest mistake is trying to deal with the fish out of the water — in the boat, on a dock, or on the shore. Releasing a fish should be seamless, but some anglers find it stressful when they're under the gun time-wise and all jacked up after hooking the fish. Having a plan is better for both you and the fish."

DID YOU KNOW?

If you hold a fish upside down while trying to remove the hook, it will usually squirm less.