



# HANDLING AND RELEASING FISH

## Ways to safely return the fish to water

Some fish you might want to keep to eat and others you may want to release alive to grow and be caught another day. Some wild fish populations can stand a lot of harvest (panfish) and others cannot. It takes six or seven years to grow a large trout or bass. If you want to preserve the large fish for future fishing, then you'll need to handle them properly or they will die. Fish have delicate gills through which they breathe oxygen. And their bodies have delicate internal organs. Here are five steps to follow to prevent injury to the fish you catch for release.

1. Some trophies you will want to photograph, but in most cases, don't handle the fish. It is covered with a protective slime. When you handle the fish you disturb the slime and the fish can develop a fungus in the spots you touch. That fungus may eventually kill the fish. Do not touch a fish with a dry hand. Simply reach down and release the hook from the fish's mouth and allow it to swim away untouched. Small pliers or forceps facilitate hook removal.

2. If you must handle the fish, do so gently by turning the fish on its side in your hand, where it will usually become immobile, or by turning it completely upside down in the water (facing upcurrent), where it will become immobile. Then you can remove the hook and release the fish easily without a struggle.

If you want to photograph your fish, try to do so while submerged or make sure to have the camera ready so the fish is lifted from the water for only a short period for photographing.

3. When handling the fish, make sure that you do not put your fingers into the gills. The fish can survive if it begins to bleed slightly from the gills, but its chances of surviving major gill damage are slim.

4. Don't squeeze the fish when handling it because you can damage its delicate internal organs.

5. Make sure that you revive the fish completely before releasing it. If the fish is exhausted it will turn over on its side or upside down. Large fish will require you to spend some time in reviving because they only come to the net after being completely exhausted. Small fish often don't need to be revived at all because they are on the line for only a short time, and are usually not physically stressed by the event.

When you revive a fish, make sure you hold it upright and in a gentle flow of water so it can get its gills working and recover oxygen from the water. In still water, hold the fish gently and watch it pump water through its gills, providing much-needed oxygen to the fish. If the gill action is weak, or non-existent you may have to glide it back and forth in the water so the water flows through the gills. As the fish revives, its gills will work more energetically until it is able to remain upright in the water and finally swim away on its own.

Don't try to revive the fish in the fast current. If it slips away, it will begin spinning and turn upside down and you won't be able to save it. Revive stream fish in the gentle flows near the bank.

