



AMERICAN FLY FISHING TRADE ASSOCIATION

AFTA Statement on Catch & Release

"A good game fish is too valuable to be caught only once" - Lee Wolfe, 1938

AFTA believes that each angler can make a difference when it comes to the future of our sport. Nowhere is this more critical than each time an angler makes a conscious decision about how they are going to handle and release their catch. Even if an angler intends to keep a fish for a meal, state and federal regulations mandate that some fish be released (e.g., size limits, bag limits, regulated species). As such, adopting scientifically validated best practices for catch-and-release is a way that each angler can practice conservation every day they fish, and for every fish they catch. Also, by helping to change the perceptions related to catch-and-release, each angler, as well as the angling industry, can help define the socially acceptable way fish are handled and released. Ensuring that more fish survive catch-and-release and contributing to the future of their population, means healthier fisheries to fuel our sport.

Background and Statistics

- 2004 - Total annual recreational catch worldwide estimated at 47-billion fish, with as many as 30-billion (60%) being released (Cooke and Cowx 2004, *BioScience*).
- Catch-and-release angling is a management and conservation strategy that assumes a large proportion of released fish survive and experience limited impacts to their overall health.
- There are over 425 scientific studies focused specifically on the catch-and-release of fish, and the discipline is growing.
- Catch-and-release mortality varies widely among species and even locations, and many studies are providing information about how anglers can alter their behavior to reduce impacts.
- Although government agencies and non-government organizations, including the fly fishing industry, embrace the idea of catch-and-release, there is evidence that the information being conveyed is incomplete or does not accurately reflect the outcome of catch-and-release science (Pelletier, et al 2007; Sims and Danylchuk 2017, Danylchuk et al. 2017).

- Accurately translating the results of the science is critical to getting the information into the hands of stakeholders to positively affect change with the way fish are handled and released.

The Need for a Persistent and Consistent Message

- AFFTA advocates for the persistent and constant dissemination of scientifically validated best practices for catch-and-release.
- Partnering with scientists and organizations that specialize in catch-and-release research can help expedite the process of addressing questions from our members related to best practices.
- Partnering with organizations that are translating and promoting scientifically validated best practices for catch-and-release, and are regularly updating education and outreach material, will ensure the most accurate information is in the hands of our members.

Summary of Impacts and Related Benefits of Best Practices for Catch & Release

- Many studies show that deep hooking and hooking in critical areas (e.g., gills) can result in immediate and short-term mortality. From the science, hook selection (style and size) and not trying to dig out hooks from sensitive areas are the best approach. When in doubt, cut the line.
- Fish have evolved to extract dissolved oxygen from water, not take oxygen out of the air (like us). As such, air exposure following physical exertion during the fight (i.e., exercise) stops respiration, and can compromise recovery leading to impairment, and changes in swimming performance, and reduced survival. Although some fish are more tolerant to air exposure than others, science shows that it is best to minimize, or even eliminate air exposure.
- Science has demonstrated that excessive handling of a fish once landed can result in slime loss, frayed fins, and physical damage if the fish hits a hard surface such as a rock or the deck of a boat. Studies have also shown that lip gripping devices and the way fish are held can result in physical damage. Certain nets can also have negative impacts on fish by removing slime and scales. Until more science is done in these areas, use precaution when handling fish, and reduce overall handling time unless a fish needs additional recovery from the stress of capture, and use soft, rubberized nets.