

Care of the Catch

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photos by the author

The high point of a day of fishing is often hooking a nice fish. You've done everything right, cast your lure to just the right place, and a nice fish has struck. After a firm hookset, you begin to fight the fish. Now comes the biggest question of the day: *What will you do if you land the fish?*



Releasing your catch

Many anglers today practice catch and release. Most anglers do this for conservation reasons, but there are times when regulations require that fish be released. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that a fish will live, even though it may appear to be in good condition when it's released. Many factors influence a fish's chance for survival when it's returned to the water. Nevertheless, if you follow these steps closely, you greatly increase the likelihood of your catch's survival.

- Play the fish quickly. Time is important, so play and release a fish as quickly as possible. Don't play or fight the fish until it's completely exhausted.

- Keep the fish in the water. A fish suffocates out of water, or it could sustain brain damage. In addition, you can fatally injure a fish if you let it flop around on rocks or on a boat deck.

- Be gentle when handling fish. If you handle fish, wet your hands first. It's best for the fish if you keep your hands off. If you handle a fish, don't squeeze it, and keep your fingers out of its gills. Small-mesh nets are helpful if the mesh doesn't get tangled in the fish's gills.

- Remove the hook gently but as quickly as possible. Use long-nosed pliers, forceps or similar tools. If a fish is

hooked deeply, cut the line near the fish's mouth and leave the hook in. Don't tear out the hook. Removing hooks from deep in the mouth or throat will injure the fish, and take valuable time. Barbless hooks may be easier to remove.

- Revive the fish and then release it. Hold the fish upright underwater. Move the fish slowly and gently forward and backward to force water through its gills. When the fish revives and can swim under its own power, let it go.

Keeping, dressing, storing your catch

There is no better way to end a day of fishing than to enjoy a meal of fresh fish. Catch and release is OK, but it doesn't do much to fill the stomach. Remember that there is nothing wrong with taking a few fish for a meal or two, as long as it



follows regulations and laws. Remember also to take only what you know you'll use and return the rest unharmed. Also, if a fish is bleeding or there is damage to the gills or eyes, keep the fish for dinner, but only if regulations allow. Fish that do not recover enough for release in a few minutes won't recover. They should also be kept for the dinner table.

To ensure that the fish you keep taste their best, take some time to plan before your trip. Fish is a perishable food. If you plan to bring fish home, keep your catch alive as long as possible. Then dress them promptly. A good stringer, fish basket or boat live well is fine for short periods, especially when the water is cool. Avoid placing fish in a bucket of water. Fish quickly use up the limited oxygen in a bucket of water and die. Never put fish in a plastic bag or let them lie in the sun.

Dressing

The best way to keep fish fresh is to dress



The Law

- **Releasing your catch.**

When required, releasing your catch must be done so that the fish is immediately returned unharmed to the waters from which it was taken.

- **Dressing, filleting your catch.**

Pennsylvania law requires that you keep the head and tail on fish with a minimum size, though these species may be dressed. Other species may be filleted in the field, but the skin must remain on the fillet.

Filleting

Filleting is the removal of the edible meat found along the sides of a fish. It is one of the most popular ways to prepare a wide variety of fish to cook, from panfish to walleyes. When done correctly, it provides virtually bone-free portions of fish ready to cook. Proceed slowly at first. There is no substitute for practice, so go catch a few and give it a try.

Here's how:

1. Hold the fish on a cutting board with the fish on its side. Using a fillet knife, cut through the back of the head to the backbone.

2. Turn the fish so the back faces you. With the blade angled so it runs along the backbone, push the knife along the backbone to the tail using a sawing motion. Cut deeply enough to touch the top of the rib cage.

3. Pull the fillet away from the fish's body while making small, careful cuts to remove the fillet from the rib cage.

4. When the knife blade no longer contacts the rib cage, push the knife through the width of the fish. The blade will exit on the bottom of the fish near the vent. Continue cutting along the bone until the fillet is cut off at the tail.

5. Turn the fish over and repeat steps 1 through 4 on the other side.

6. Taking one fillet, slice a bit of the skin away from the flesh. In large fish, cut a hole in the loose skin so you can fit your finger through it.

7. Hold the skin and pull the skin away from the fillet, using the knife to hold the fillet down. Hold the knife at a 45-degree angle. It is important to hold the knife at the correct angle and to pull on the skin.

With your fingers or clean tweezers, feel for any pin bones and pull them out of the fillets.



them quickly and put them directly on ice. Killing and dressing the fish quickly are more humane and protect the quality of the meat. Dressing a fish involves cleaning out its body cavity and removing blood, bacteria and other material in the digestive tract. Use a blow to the fish's head from pliers or a knife handle to stun it, making it easier to handle. Cut the "belly" of the fish from the anal vent to the throat, removing the entrails. You should also cut out and remove the gills. Removing the fish's internal organs and gills slows spoilage and prevents undesirable changes in flavor and texture.

Chilling

Cooling fish is critical. Spoilage begins as soon as the fish dies. All fish spoil rapidly if they aren't chilled right away. Ice is the best choice for chilling fish. Cold water is the next best choice, followed by covering the fish with a wet cloth. Note the temperature of the water in which you're fishing. Keeping fish in warm water isn't a good idea. If you plan to be out all day, bring ice. Here are a few tips to chill your fish correctly:

- Use lots of ice. One pound of ice for each two pounds of fish is a good rule of thumb. Use more if you have a long trip home.
- "Blue ice" types of products are less effective at lowering storage temperatures to 32 degrees.
- Blood and bacteria drain from fish into the melted ice, so avoid letting fish lie in meltwater. Drain meltwater from coolers or other containers as necessary.
- Fish kept in crushed ice at 32 degrees will last twice as long as fish kept at 42 degrees, which is the most common refrigerator temperature.

Steaking

Larger fish such as salmon may also be steaked. After the fish has been dressed, just cut down through the entire body. Make the cuts at about one-inch intervals.

Storage

Fish taste best if they are cooked soon after they are caught. Fish can be stored in a refrigerator for a few days, but if you cannot cook them within that time, they should be frozen. The best freezing method is to submerge the fish completely in cold water. Plastic freezer bags and freezer containers are good freezing packages for this method. This method helps prevent freezer burn and drying, and it preserves the flavor of your catch.

Before you cook

Fish are nutritious and good to eat, but may take in contaminants from the water they live in and from the food they eat. Some of these contaminants build up in the fish—and in you—over time. These contaminants could harm people who eat them, so it is important to limit exposure to these contaminants. The PA Fish & Boat Commission, in

cooperation with the PA Department of Health and PA Department of Environmental Protection, issues consumption advisories with information regarding these contaminants. These advisories help you plan which fish to keep, as well as how often and how much to eat. These advisories apply only to recreationally caught sport fish in Pennsylvania, not commercial fish. Consult your current *Summary of Fishing Regulations and Laws* for additional information on consumption advisories.

To reduce contaminants in fish:

- Remove the skin and "belly" meat along the bottom of the fish.
- Remove any fat above the fish's backbone.
- Remove the V-shaped wedge of fat along the lateral line on each side of the fish.
- Bake or broil fish on a rack or grill so that fat drips away.
- Discard the drippings. Do not eat them or use them for cooking other foods.

Older, larger and fatty fish tend to collect more contaminants. Eating smaller, younger fish and avoiding fatty species can help limit your exposure. Your exposure depends not only on levels in the fish, but also on the amount of fish you eat. The consumption of any fish from contaminated waters is a matter of personal choice.



Web resources

There is lots of additional information on the Internet that can help you care for your catch. Check out these links to begin:

Penn State Cooperative Extension page on fish care and handling:

www.cas.psu.edu/docs/publications/freepubs/FreePubs/pdfs/uk068.pdf

Pennsylvania Sea Grant page on fish handling and food safety:

www.pserie.psu.edu/seagrants/communication/poster/poster4.html