



Catch and Release: A Guide to Best Practice



Background

Catch and release is one method by which anglers can help to safeguard salmon and wild trout stocks in Scottish rivers and lochs. Most anglers have at some time released adult fish. For example, coloured fish close to spawning are always spared, and the release of kelts is mandatory. A modern trend is to release fish that are in prime condition, as a conservation measure.

In recent years, the number of salmon returning to Scottish rivers has declined. Early-running or 'spring' salmon have been particularly affected by these trends. Unfortunately, we know from a number of studies that anglers are capable of catching a surprisingly large proportion of spring salmon – around 30%. Each fish that is caught and killed reduces the number of fish available to spawn.

Because of this, many anglers now practise catch and release, especially during the early months of the season, realising that by doing so they can make a worthwhile investment in future fisheries. Indeed, the strong trend towards catch and release can be seen in the official catch statistics. For example, in 2003 anglers reported releasing 55% of all the salmon they caught.

It is important that fish which have been released survive their capture and handling, and go on to spawn. Recent research has shown that almost all fish will survive if they are treated properly, according to a simple set of rules.

Terminal Tackle and Fishing Methods

If you intend to release some or all of your catch, it is advisable to use the appropriate tackle.

- Single hooks are much easier to remove than either double or treble hooks, and barbless hooks are easier to remove than barbed ones. If you do not have barbless hooks, you can flatten the barbs with pliers. Multi-hooked lures should not be used.

Playing and Landing Fish

- The more exhausted a fish becomes, the lower are its chances of survival. It is better to land the fish quickly, and firm pressure should be used to subdue it. The fish should be netted using a soft, knotless mesh net and kept in the water as much as possible since fish breathe through their wetted gills.



- The hook should be removed immediately with the fish remaining in the water. It is sometimes easier to cut the leader first and lay the rod aside so that you can concentrate fully on looking after the fish. If there is someone with you, they can help by holding the net. If you are alone, you can support the handle of the net between your knees or perhaps use the riverbank or a stone to support the net rim.
- Be gentle and take care to wet your hands before handling the fish. Be careful not to squeeze the fish when removing the hook. On no account put your fingers under the gill covers. Extra care is required with very fresh fish as their scales are easily dislodged and this can lead to fungal infection.

Forceps or pliers make removing the hook much easier and should be kept to hand. Self-locking surgical forceps are very effective.

Releasing Fish

Avoid weighing fish – even in nets fitted with integral scales. If necessary, you can get a good estimate of the fish's weight by measuring its length. A tape measure can be carried to do this or you can mark out the net handle, wading staff or rod. If you are alone a photograph can be

taken of the fish in the net. If a companion is nearby, a photograph can be taken as you briefly lift the fish out of the water.

- The fish should be supported gently in the water for release, head upstream to aid breathing, until it makes to swim off. This may take some time, depending on how tired the fish is, but be patient. When you feel the fish trying to swim away, let it go.

Doing Your Bit

The chances of survival of a released fish depend on how it has been handled. If you handle the fish properly you can be confident that the fish will have the greatest chance of going on to spawn. Catch and release is one of the most effective ways in which anglers can contribute to the future of their sport.



Summary

- Use appropriate tackle, play fish quickly and use a knotless nylon net.
- Keep the fish in the water as much as possible.
- Handle the fish as carefully as possible.
- Support the fish facing into the current until it has recovered, then let it go.

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