



Code of Practice for Recreational Fishers in WA

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Enjoy your fishing – humanely and responsibly

Fishing is an integral part of Western Australia's lifestyle and culture. Every year, more than half a million of us enjoy the fishing experiences our clear blue Indian Ocean, rivers and estuaries offer.

In the process we catch and dispatch or release many millions of fish, crabs, lobsters and other sea creatures.

Animal welfare and health is an important issue for the Australian community, and in recent years has received growing attention at international, national and state levels.

Western Australia proclaimed a new *Animal Welfare Act* in 2002; and amendments were also made to the *Fish Resources Management Act 1994* to include the legal power in the prescription of measures to prevent cruelty to fish and provide for the adoption of codes of practice for the use, care, welfare, safety or health of fish.

In 2005 the Commonwealth released the *Australian Animal Welfare Strategy*, which was developed to provide the national and international communities with an appreciation of animal welfare arrangements in Australia and to outline directions for future improvements in the welfare of animals.

The principles contained in these policies and laws all clearly recognise that not only do many animals have an important role for human industry, consumption and recreation, they also have intrinsic value as living creatures and should be treated in a humane fashion irrespective of their use.

This code is your code

The Recreational Fishing Advisory Committee (RFAC), a committee appointed by the Minister for Fisheries, is pleased to present this Code of Practice promoting responsible fishing in Western Australia by recreational fishers.

Developed in consultation with the State's 12 Regional RFACs, Recfishwest and Western Australian animal welfare groups, the Code of Practice is a response to the proclamation of the *Animal Welfare Act 2002* and subsequent amendments to the *Fish Resources Management Act 1994*.

The code complements and expands upon the *National Code of Practice for Recreational and Sport Fishing 2002*. It promotes responsible standards for the capture and handling of line-caught fish by recreational fishers, consistent with public standards of care and the humane treatment of animals.

The Code of Practice describes general procedures for the humane catching and release of fish and crustaceans. To reduce stress and trauma in our unique aquatic life, Western Australian anglers are urged to enjoy fishing in a responsible and humane way by following the guidelines below.

General aims and principles behind the code:

To prevent cruelty and effectively manage the welfare of fish and other aquatic organisms, anglers are encouraged to minimise stress and trauma to aquatic animals by:

- Using appropriate legal gear.
- Landing the catch as quickly as possible.
- Handling aquatic animals appropriately.
- Applying humane methods of killing to aquatic animals caught for food.
- Applying 'best practice' techniques to improve the survival of fish being released.
- Ensuring that harm to other aquatic animals (for example seabirds, turtles and seals) is minimised as a result of fishing activities.
- Disposing of unwanted fishing gear and litter onshore, in a proper disposal facility.

Finfish

Whether the catch is intended for food or to be released back into the wild, the following techniques will help minimise stress on any line-caught fish. This will improve the eating quality of any fish kept for the table and maximise the chances of survival for any released fish.

Landing fish

- Use appropriate tackle to ensure the fish being targeted are caught in a reasonable time to minimise stress. Avoid using very light line classes for large fish. Playing a fish for an extended period will exhaust the fish, reduce its

chances of survival and reduce the eating qualities of fish being retained.

- Use barbless hooks – this makes hooks easier to remove and results in less damage to the fish.
- Where appropriate, use hook patterns such as circle hooks to maximise the likelihood of the hook being lodged in the jaw instead of the gut.
- Attend gear to ensure that fish are retrieved as soon as they are hooked.
- Change to a larger hook size if undersize fish are being caught.
- When landing a large fish use a landing net, preferably a knotless net with soft mesh to minimise the damage to fish scales and slime. If intending to release a fish, avoid lifting fish weighing over one kilogram from the water, especially if the hook cannot be seen, as this may cause damage to the fish.
- Use a comfort lift by placing a hand under and across the fish while lifting it from the water, to calm the fish.
- Avoid placing fish on a hot, dry surface if they are to be returned to the water.
- Minimise the time any fish is out of the water. A fish out of water for more than a few minutes suffers permanent damage to its gills.
- Avoid using treble hooks.

Handling fish

- Use wet hands, wet gloves (cotton or untextured) or a wet cloth and be gentle.
- Keep a bucket of seawater nearby.
- Keep fingers out of the fish's gill covers or eye sockets.
- A large fish should be held under but not inside the gill covers with one hand and its body supported with the other hand, to avoid damage to the spine and internal organs.

- Place fish on a smooth, wet surface to measure.
- Place a wet cloth across the fish's eyes to settle them.
- Ensure that the fish's eyes are shaded when they are out of the water as direct sunlight causes damage.
- Where appropriate use a fish holding device (for example a fish grip) to assist in handling and immobilising fish, but always with the body of the fish fully supported.
- Fish and crustaceans that are to be kept should be killed as soon as possible.

Removal of hooks

- When removing a hook from a fish intended for release, keep the fish in the water where possible or place the fish on a cool, wet surface for hook removal.
- If the hook is swallowed and the fish is to be retained for food, then the fish should be killed humanely.
- If the hook is swallowed and the fish is to be released, then the line should be cut 20-30 centimetres from the hook. Leaving this length of line reduces the chance of the hook obstructing the fish's feeding.
- If a hook is lodged in the jaw or inside the mouth, it should be carefully removed using a de-hooker or long nosed pliers by pushing the hook back, to minimise damage.
- If the hook is close to or in the gills, cut the line and lift the gill cover to retrieve the hook rather than removing it from the mouth. Take care not to damage the gills of a fish as they bleed easily.

Taking of fish

Practice good fishing ethics for the future, including 'limiting your catch' rather than aiming to 'catch your limit'. Remember to take only what you need, otherwise there may be unnecessary waste.

Releasing fish

An increasing number of recreational fishers are aware that conservation, catch-and-release and tag-and-release are an integral part of fishing practice.

The introduction of bag and size limits for many recreational species means that more fish are now being released than ever before. A number of factors, such as the type of fish, depth of capture and post-capture handling can affect mortality rates.

To maximise the survival rate and reduce the non-lethal effects of fish being released, it is recommended that:

- Any landed fish intended for release should be returned to the water as quickly as possible.
- When returning a fish to the water, position it head-first gently from the minimum possible height.
- To revive a tired or semi-conscious fish, hold it gently by the tail and pull it backwards through the water in a figure of eight pattern until it is moving independently.
- Demersal fish (bottom seabed fish) suffering from barotrauma – the fish equivalent of the 'bends' suffered by divers ascending rapidly from deep water to the surface – need to be treated in order to increase their chances of survival. Barotrauma is evident in most cases as the expanded swim bladder pushes the stomach of the fish out through its mouth. This can be treated by the use of a release weight. When using a release-weighted line, the fish is hooked in the jaw with a barbless hook,

attached to the weight and lowered to the bottom on a cord or fishing line. When the cord or fishing line is pulled back, the hook dislodges from the fish.

- If boat fishing for larger fish, including billfish, the fish should be swum with the boat moving slowly forward with the fish's head below the surface of the water. This will allow water to pass over the gills of a tired fish and enable it to be revived.
- Tagging programs should only be condoned where there is a clear purpose with well-defined outcomes.

Additional information on caring for fish can be found on the Fisheries Research and Development Corporation website at www.info-fish.net/releasefish/ and in the 'Catch Care' Tips for Recreational Fishers brochure on the Department of Fisheries website at www.fish.wa.gov.au/docs/pub/CatchCare/

Keeping fish for consumption

- It is recommended that if a fish is to be retained for food, the fish should be killed humanely with a blow to the head using a suitable blunt instrument.
- It is recommended that fish held prior to being filleted be placed in a slurry of ice and water as soon as possible. Use saltwater for marine (saltwater) species.
- It is recommended that all of your catch be used, not just the fillets. Wings, heads and frames contain flesh that should not be wasted.
- Fish that are to be frozen keep better, for longer, using vacuum-sealed bags to prevent freezer burn and loss of quality.

Further information

Animal Welfare Act 2002, Western Australia.

Fish Resources Management Act 1994, Western Australia.

Australian Animal Welfare Strategy (2005), Commonwealth of Australia.

A code of practice on releasing fish (2002). Australian National Sportsfishing Association. www.info-fish.net

Recfish code of practice on releasing fish (2004). Recfishwest. www.info-fish.net

A national code of practice for recreational fishing (1996). Recfish Australia. www.recfish.com.au

'Catch Care' – *Tips for Recreational Fishers*. Department of Fisheries, Western Australia. www.fish.wa.gov.au

Released fish survival strategy. Infofish. www.info-fish.net

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