



FISH WELFARE CODE OF CONDUCT FOR RECREATIONAL FISHING IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

There are over 740,000 recreational fishers in Western Australia. Recreational fishing is an intrinsic part of Australian culture and has proven health and wellbeing benefits. Recreational fishing is important within a social and economic context, with millions of dollars invested in fishing equipment and associated tourism every year. With appropriate sustainability, fish welfare and fisheries management practices in place, recreational fishing will continue to be one of Australia's most popular pastimes well into the future.

This is a voluntary Code of Conduct (Code) that represents the use of best practices relating to fish welfare. This Code is based on scientific information and seeks to maintain high quality fishing experiences while also maintaining fish welfare.

This Code outlines a set of practices which recreational fishers across the state can implement to ensure they maintain the welfare and quality of fish they interact with during the course of their fishing activities.

In this document, fish refers to finfish as outlined in *the Fisheries Resources Management Act 1994* (DoF, 2012).

Objectives

The objective of this Code of Conduct is to:

- Promote awareness of best practice methods to maintain fish welfare;
- Ensure the welfare of fish to be released;
- Ensure the welfare of fish to be held alive; and,
- Ensure humane dispatch of fish to be kept.

Catching fish

The objective of these guidelines is to minimise the potential for unnecessarily harming a fish.

- Where practicable, use artificial or dead baits, rather than live baits and where practicable use lures rather than baits as this reduces the chance of gut hooking;

- Do not leave fishing gear unattended and retrieve fish as quickly as parameters such as depth will permit;
- Use gear of appropriate size for the target species, larger hooks reduce the chance of deep-hooking, as well as catching smaller non-target species.
- Use barbless hooks, as these are easier to remove and reduce handling time.
- Use circle hooks with a minimum offset (the hook is in line with the shank), this reduces the chance of gut hooking.
- Use the heaviest class of line appropriate to the fish being targeted, as this reduces retrieval time and the chance of fish breaking off and retaining gear.
- Use lures instead of bait, as this reduces the chance of gut hooking.
- Use soft, knotless landing nets, as this reduces the damage to scales and the protective slime of the fish.

If you plan to keep your catch, the following guidelines should be followed:

Humane dispatch

The objective of these guidelines is to dispatch of retained fish in a fast and humane manner.

- Humanely dispatch fish immediately if you plan to keep them, rather than retaining them alive only to kill them later, as this reduces stress on the fish and increases the quality of the flesh;
- Minimise handling prior to dispatch, as this reduces stress on the fish;
- Methods for the humane dispatch of fish include:
 - Ike jime (spiking), which involves driving a spike through the brain and, when done correctly, this method results in immediate death and high quality flesh, and can be used on fish, crustaceans and cephalopods;
 - Cranial concussion with a blunt object and a blow of appropriate force for the size of the fish should render the fish unconscious and it can then be bled out. When done correctly, this method ensures the fish is unconscious at the time of death and a high quality flesh results from the bleeding out;
 - For tropical fish, place in ice bath of a 3:1 ratio of crushed ice to salt water at a temperature of minus 1 degree Celsius for 20-30 minutes, depending on the species;

If you plan to release your fish, the following guidelines should be followed:

Handling fish

The objective of these guidelines is to minimise the duration and stress resulting from the direct handling of fish caught.

- Minimise fish handling as much as possible;
- Keep the fish in the water for as long as possible and, if practicable, remove the hook while the fish is in the water, as this reduces stress on the fish and the potential for damage to the fish while handling;
- If removing a fish from water, hold its body rather than its tail or gills and always try to support its body horizontally, as this will reduce the chance of damage to the gills and spine;
- If handling a fish, always handle fish with wet hands or wet gloves (cotton or untextured), as this reduces the chance of damage to scales and mucus;
- If you must place a fish on a surface, place it on a cool, soft, wet surface where practicable, as this reduces the chance of damage to scales and mucus;
- If placing a fish on a surface, ensure the area is clear of obstacles and that the fish is restrained with a firm grip, as this will avoid self-harm from the fish flailing around;
- It is best to weigh fish on a cool, wet, horizontal surface rather than using a device such as lip-grips which can cause spinal damage resulting from the fish being held vertically;
- If using a fish grip to assist with handling the fish, ensure the fish remains horizontal, as this avoids spinal damage to the fish;
- If taking samples to assist with scientific studies, ensure appropriate procedures are followed which minimise handling time and the extent of interactions with the fish;
- Use long-nosed pliers to assist in hook removal, as this reduces handling time and damage to fish when removing hooks.

Releasing fish

The objective of these guidelines is to maximise the chance of survival of released fish.

- Remove mouth hooks using appropriate gear and try to do so quickly, as this will ensure the hook won't be dislodged later and swallowed;
- If a fish is throat or gut hooked, cut the line as close to the mouth as possible, as this avoids excessive damage from attempting to remove a deep hook and the fish will usually eject or dislodge the hook itself within a few weeks;
- If attempts to minimise fight time or handling time have been ineffective and the fish appears exhausted, place it horizontally in the water and push it through the water to move water over its gills;
- If a fish is experiencing barotrauma (the result of gases in the swim bladder expanding upon rising to the surface, which is identified by bulging eyes or organs protruding from the mouth), use a release weight (see <http://www.recfishwest.org.au/publications/release->

[weight.html](#)) for how to use a release weight), as this is the easiest method for dealing with barotrauma and will increase the survival of released demersal fish;

- For large fish suffering from barotrauma familiarise yourself with venting procedures;
- Where practicable, release fish in locations that will increase their chances of survival such as in fast running or well-aerated water or away from any visible top predators, as this will aid recover and avoid predation on the fish.

Retaining live fish, for later release

The objective of these guidelines is, where retention of live fish is required, to minimise stress and maximise the welfare of fish that are to be retained alive.

- Live wells are the preferable holding device for fish;
- Ensure your live well has rounded corners, as this aids swimming and avoids fish trapping themselves in the corners;
- Keep the water at ambient temperature, as dissolved oxygen levels increase with lower water temperatures, thus reducing stress levels;
- Ensure the lid of such containers are not airtight, as this allows for ambient gas exchange;
- Try to reduce the time spent in the live well, as this will lessen the chance of stress and exposure to sub-optimal conditions;
- Ensure fish have sufficient space in the live well, ensuring overcrowding doesn't occur;
- Ensure you have an appropriate aeration system such as aerator pumps, air stones or spray bars, as this will increase the dissolved oxygen, which reduces stress on the fish;
- Use aeration systems that release smaller air bubbles, as this will result in more oxygen being diffused into the water;
- If fish are seen gasping at the surface and crowding around inlets, exchange the water, as this will increase dissolved oxygen levels.