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Tope Handling - A code of best practise

Approved by the NFSA, SACN, SFSA, Shark Trust and the UK shark tagging programme

Introduction

Whilst tope may look big and tough creatures they are actually quite delicate especially when out of the water. This code has been written so that you can enjoy tope angling but most importantly cause the minimum of damage to any tope you are lucky enough to encounter. Please remember a gut hooked fish is usually down to bad angling practise and should be avoided by striking early and releasing a tope at the side of the boat is the preferred method.

Be Prepared

It is essential that you are prepared for any eventuality when bringing a tope to the boat. It sounds obvious, but the time taken to find buried tools in lockers or under a pile of clothing means the tope is under stress for longer than necessary. This means having T bars, pliers, wire cutters, tagging kits, weighing slings (if applicable), cameras etc. at hand and each person on board knowing what is expected of him. Time is the vital factor that may dictate whether the fish will survive the capture and subsequent release

Hook sizes

The use of bronze finished hooks is the singularly most important factor in the release of hooked sharks, as any hook that has to be left in a fish will dissolve rapidly. Mustad Codes 3406, and 79514BR or VMC 9255BZ hooks are highly recommended as they are proven to 'dissolve' from the mouth position within 5 days. Size 6/0 is recommended, either barb-less or with the barb crushed. As lip hooking significantly reduces the likelihood of a hook being left in the fish the use of circle hooks should also be considered.

Traces

Tope are a large, strong fish with sharp teeth and rough skin. Losing a fish because of an inappropriate trace increases the likelihood of fish mortality due to trailing line. The trace should be at least 2 metres in length so the tope's tail can't hit your main line. The preferred traces are 25cm. of 150lb. wire to a swivel and 175cm. of 100-150lb. mono/braid or 2 metres of 250lb. mono straight through. All wire traces are dangerous as they can cut the hands of the lead man when holding the trace with a thrashing tope on it.

When to strike

The old books used to say, "Strike at the start of the second run", but this will usually lead to a deep hooked fish. Once the tope has started the familiar screaming run, count to six on a big bait (full mackerel) or three on a small bait (fillet size) and wind down firmly into fish. It is imperative you wind quickly at first to get rid of the bow before lifting the rod to set the hook. A gut hooked fish is usually down to bad angling practise.



Releasing at the side of the boat – This is the preferred method.

Although tope cannot be deemed as man eaters, they can inflict serious injury if not handled correctly. The recommended option is to release the fish at the side of the boat with a long handled “T” bar. This is far better for the fish and easiest option for

the angler. Insert the slit on the bar round the bend of the hook with one hand and pull the line down with the other. Use the weight of the fish to pull out the hook. A barbless hook or crushed barb makes this a simple task.



To leave the hook in or not?

There are occasions, all though this is often down to inexperience or bad angling practise when, the tope swallows everything and the hook is out of sight or in the protruding stomach. The best option for the welfare of the fish is to cut the line as close to the hook as possible. The tope will lose the hook eventually (quicker if not stainless steel or bronzed hooks) and will swallow the stomach as this method is used by sharks, as a defence mechanism to get rid of unwanted stomach contents. If you can see the hook in the wall of the mouth then it may be necessary to bring the fish into the boat.

Bringing the fish on board

If a fish cannot be satisfactorily released without bringing it on board then the following should be borne in mind. Sharks are cartilaginous and their soft organs lack the support of a mammal type rib cage structure.. To limit the risk of lethal damage please observe the following:

It is essential you try and bring the fish in horizontally, with arms supporting the soft abdomen area if possible. For vessels with high gunnels then firmly hold the dorsal fin and tail and lift the fish horizontally, alternatively a pectoral fin may be used, however, where possible, the abdomen should be supported to the highest degree possible.

Dragging a fish backwards over the gunnels is likely to cause lethal damage to the fish

It is important at this stage that everyone on board knows their job. If you have spare men on board then ask them to stand clear. Once the lead man has firmly grasped the trace, the drag on the reel should be reduced to allow the lead man to gain line if he requires it, or allow the fish to move if the lead man releases/fails to grasp the leader and the fish still has a head of steam. When the tope is brought aboard and placed on the deck, the lead man should then squat around the fish applying enough pressure to restrain it. A wet cloth or towel soaked in sea water should be placed over the head ensuring the eyes are fully covered; this usually pacifies the tope and makes the removal of the hook with a disgorging or long nosed pliers an easier and safer procedure. Remember, a loose tope on the deck can cause much damage to itself and to persons on board.

Where an angler is fishing alone it is recommended that all fish are released at the side of the boat, either by using a T bar or cutting the line close to the fish. If the tope is to be weighed, the preferred method is by the use of a weighing sling. The tope should be laid on the sling (laid out on the deck in preparation) the moment it is brought aboard, ensuring that unsupported movement within the boat is restricted. Ensure that the fish is placed evenly within the sling before lifting. For photographing and returning the fish remember to keep the fish horizontal, with the ribcage supported by the arms.

When releasing the tope, hold the tope into the tide for a short period to get oxygen back into its gills, once the fish kicks that is a good indication that it has recovered enough to be released.

In no circumstances is the use of a gaff or a lasso type tailer recommended. It is not necessary and both will seriously damage the tope.

Conclusion

The best practice for angler and fish is to remove the hook at the side of the boat, but if you have to land the fish then the safety of the angler and fish is paramount and care must be taken at all times. A tope's teeth are as sharp as razor blades and will instantly bite a finger to the bone. Enjoy the fishing but please remember respect must be given to these magnificent sharks at all times.