Best Practices for Carefully Releasing Halibut

The Basics

- Decide quickly whether to keep the fish. Use a yardstick, marks on the side of the boat, or any tool that helps you calculate the length of the fish to determine whether you want it.
- Have an unhooking device at the ready, such as a gaff or rod with a curved end, which can be slid down the leader until it reaches the bend of the hook. With a quick push and twist motion, roll out the hook.
- If possible, unhook the fish while it is still in the water. If the fish is too large or vigorous to unhook safely, cut the leader close to the hook. It won't harm the fish and the hook probably will fall out eventually.
- If you must bring a fish into the boat, minimize handling and return the fish to the water immediately. Cradle it and prevent it from hitting sharp objects if it flops around. Don't lift a fish only by the tail—support it with one hand under the body. Release it gently, head first, into the sea.

Hooks and Fishing Techniques

- Circle hooks cause the least damage to a fish and are easy to remove. Use only circle hooks when bait fishing, and consider pinching or grinding down the barb.
- Jigs, J hooks, and treble hooks are more likely to injure halibut. Make sure everyone on board is aware of that potential if they expect to release fish.

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Deborah Mercy

Deborah Mercy

Terry Johnson

- Reel in the fish quickly. Prolonged playing of a fish causes exhaustion.
- Designate a place on your boat for handling fish to be released that has no pointed or sharp edges, and use padding or a soft mat to protect a flopping fish from injury.

When to Keep a Fish

- If a fish is bleeding, gut-hooked, or visibly injured, it probably won't survive. By regulation any fish not returned immediately to the sea with minimal injury must be kept and counted toward the angler's daily bag limit.

Reduce Release Numbers and Keep Count

- Avoid "chicken patches" with lots of small fish unless you plan to keep them. Releasing many small fish results in more dead fish. Encourage anglers not to release more fish than necessary to get the ones they want to keep.
- Keep a count of the fish you release each day and enter the numbers in your fishing journal.

Pass It On

- Be a role model. Encourage others to catch only what they want to keep, to handle fish gently, and to treat every halibut with respect. Working together we can ensure that Alaska's halibut remain abundant.

Remember, *Every Halibut Counts*

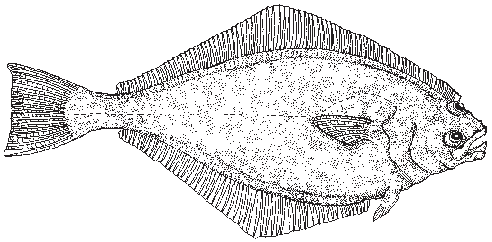
Terry Johnson

Alaska's recreational anglers

catch a lot of halibut each year and release nearly half of them. It's estimated that five to six percent of these released fish die of stress and injuries.

Alaska's halibut population has declined for reasons not yet determined. But all halibut fishermen—commercial and sport—can play a role in reducing mortality of released halibut. Halibut are sturdy fish that can survive catch and release if the angler treats the fish with care. Minimizing releases and treating fish gently helps ensure they will be available to anglers in the future.

Here are some tips suggested by charter boat operators and fishery scientists for *Every Halibut Counts*.



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www.everyhalibutcounts.org

Alaska Marine Conservation Council
CELEBRATING 20 YEARS

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Best Practices for Carefully Releasing Sport-Caught Halibut