

Handling Dangerous Fish to Avoid Injury

By: Capt. David Bacon

There are dangerous fish and there are dangerous fisherfolk. Both cause injuries. The fish we can manage, and I'll describe how do avoid injuries while handling specific Pacific coast fish which seem to want to hurt you. Dangerous fisherfolk however are another matter.

Common fishing mistakes invite disaster and it is up to you to keep calm, cool and collected enough to avoid making risky mistakes while excitement mounts as you battle big fish. Maybe this article should become required reading for passengers aboard all open-party and charter fishing vessels. I'm that sure this information will reduce injuries by keeping the dangers fresh on our minds.

Handling fish comes after successfully and - hopefully - safely boating fish, so we'll begin creating a safer fishing experience by first studying how common fishing mistakes (so common that many of you will secretly know you are guilty of one or more of these) can be identified and corrected. Then we will delve into preventing injury while handling dangerous fish. Some of the fish listed will not be ones you consider particularly dangerous, but they earned their spot on the list because of the number of bloody injuries I've seen them cause over my decades as a charter captain.

Fish handling safety begins with handling equipment:

Safe fish handling practices begin before the fish even suspects a problem. It swims along minding its own business, sees something tasty looking and instinctively takes a bite. The angler feels the bite and swings so fast and hard that the person standing beside the wild swinger gets hit in the face or the angler swings the rod so high it hits something overhead. I've watched and coached against these mistakes way too many times. Fish with your rod tip low, reel as you swing to set the hook and never swing the rod up past ten o'clock. Above that you lose sensitivity and power.

The worst offenders are fly fisherfolk who are accustomed to swinging long and light-action rods at the first hint of action. In saltwater, that's fine when fishing with artificials, but when bait fishing its important to wait until the fish has the entire bait in its mouth. When using large baits, a dose of patience is required to improve the hook-up to bite ratio.

At this point, the fish definitely suspects a problem because its lips were nearly ripped off. It tries and tries to get that hook out of its face, while our angler winds the fish to the surface - usually at near warp speed which can twist the fish right off the hook. Slow down your cranking speed. A slow steady ascent brings in more hooked fish..

Once at the surface, there are at least three common mistakes (probably many more). One big mistake is to stop reeling and do nothing when the fish reaches the surface, leaving the fish floating on top of the water. It frequently manages to lose the hook because the line isn't taught. Without a taught line to keep it in place, a hook will often work its way out of a fish in short order. This is not a safety mistake, but it sure loses a lot of fish.

Another mistake is to keep reeling until the fish or weight is pulled up tight to the eye on the rod tip. The old joke is, "Once you reel that fish through that first tiny eye at the rod tip, the rest are easier because they are bigger and the fish is now skinnier!" With the fish near the rod tip, no one can easily reach the fish to take it off the hook. The angler lifts the rod and swings the fish into the boat where it is now head-high and swinging wildly. Spines impale people in the face, neck, shoulders and hands, while the angler causing the problem stands there looking helpless and clueless.

Stop reeling when there is four feet of line between the fish and the rod tip. Lift the rod tip without loading it up, grab the line about a foot up from the fish and bring the fish over the rail in a controlled manner to limit disasters. This method reduces risk of injury. I recognize that excitement and lack of experience makes safe fish handling practices difficult to remember, but each and every time someone gets hurt, the person who caused the mishap due to unsafe fish handling practices feels terrible and knows that they just got too excited and forgot to think about safety.

The other common mistake is trying to "bounce" a fish into the boat, by loading up the rod when the fish is at the surface and allowing it to fly up and into the boat. That fish always seems to come aboard in the most destructive manner possible. At the very least it will broadside a fellow passenger and leave a slime slick on the suddenly angry friend's favorite new jacket or bare skin. At the worst, it can cause severe physical injury to someone, which warrants a medical airlift from the boat while bleeding is controlled with compresses. Don't bounce fish!

Unfortunately, in the excitement of catching a fish, many anglers forget to think about safety. Certain fishes are more dangerous than others. The worst of the commonly caught local fish is the sculpin. They have an aggressive toxin on their spines, which causes grave injury. Any angler who allows a sculpin to wave around at the end of a rod, or fly through the air, will immediately lose the respect, but gain the attention, of a wary deckhand and skipper. I cannot use strong enough words to adequately warn of these dangers. Never bounce a fish, and never reel one all the way to the rod tip and swing it aboard the boat in an uncontrolled manner.

Happily, all of these dangers can be mitigated by thinking about safety, when handling fish. The responsibility is ours, and no one wants to be injured because of our carelessness.

Once a large fish is at boatside, I recommend using a gaff or net to quickly control the fish as it reaches the surface. This is almost a necessity with a larger fish which might bust line or rip a hook out due to its considerable weight. Netting a fish will increase its

chances for survival - especially if the fish is not touched by human hands. So if a fish is to be released, netting it is the kind and appropriate way to handle it. A gaff is the best way to control a really large fish, which might break a net, and is going to be kept for the dinner table.

Fish handling safety doesn't end with bringing the fish aboard. Every experienced deckhand I know has suffered through filleting all remaining fish and tending to deckhand duties with a swollen hand and nausea after being poked by sculpin spines. It's happened to me about a dozen and a half times. It can be hard to keep smiling at that point.

The worst fish-handling accident I ever witnessed happened many years ago aboard an open party headboat. An angler had caught a fine mess of sculpin, and had decided to save the cost of filleting by taking them home whole. As he gathered up his stuff to disembark, he grabbed his gunny sack full of sculpin and swung it over his shoulder. The look on his face was pure awe and agony when the sack hit his back and a dozen toxin-covered spines poked deeply into his back! A minute later, that man was writhing on the deck in pain. An ambulance was called. Fish handling safety is serious business.

The result of ignoring my advice and making these mistakes often results in severe bleeding, contusions, swelling, nausea, and intense pain. I implore you to read this carefully and honestly critique your own fishing habits. You can be a safer angler.

Scars and other damage all over my own hands and body attest to effects of accumulated mistakes... some made by me and many made by my passengers... and fish-handling mishaps over my decades of chartering. Each species of fish has its own defense capabilities. Careful fish-handling practices can help you avoid the chance of competing with me for scars.

Here are notes on specific species to help you stay safe while battling and handling fish:

Rockfish (including most sub species – but chucklehead are the worst) have long and sharp spines along the fin on their backs. The only really safe way to hold a rockfish is to lip-latch it like you see the freshwater bass pro's do with their largemouth and smallmouth bass. Never wrap your hand around a rockfish. When holding a rockfish to filet, use a glove and put a finger or thumb in the mouth and gills to hold it still.

Lingcod have big sharp teeth which make it pretty obvious that you don't want to put a finger in the mouth, but they also have a secret weapon... sharp red gill-rakers capable of slicing your fingers surprisingly deep. Always slip your hand between the gill plate cover and the first red gill-raker. That's the only safe way to pick up a lingcod.

Ocean whitefish have a surprise weapon... a serrated edge on the back edge of their gill-plate covers. It isn't obvious at a glance, but picking one up by the gills will get you hurt and I have seen hundreds of bloody fingers from handling these fish by the gills. Pick up ocean whitefish by their eye sockets.

Sheephead have powerful jaws and large canine-like teeth, so do not pick them up with a lip-latch. Their gill-plate covers are also difficult to get fingers under, so pick up sheephead by their eye sockets as well.

Sculpin (a.k.a. California scorpionfish, or “rattlesnake”) have toxin-covered spines, seemingly all over their bodies. The worse ones are the spines along the fin on their backs. Though each person may react differently to the toxin when poked, most folks experience rapid swelling, pain and varying degrees of nausea. Lip-latch these fish and handle them with extra care. Filet them last.

Barracuda are slash-attackers, amazingly accurate with their teeth. They inflict a deep nasty gash and because of the nature of the bacteria in their mouths, the gash can become infected quickly if not cleaned promptly with hydrogen peroxide. Pick up a barracuda by the gills.

Halibut have horrible teeth and can snap that mouth shut faster than most folks can jerk a hand away. Keep your hands away from a halibut’s mouth. But that isn’t their only weapon. A halibut’s strength is astounding when flopping wildly around a boat and they always go ballistic when brought aboard. Before bringing a large halibut aboard, move people away from the area because that angry critter can hurt you by launching loose or broken boat/fishing parts as easily as it can hurt you by body-slammng you in the leg.

Thresher shark have weapons at both ends. Their teeth may not look like those of a big-tooth shark, but they can bite through a hand in a heartbeat with their sharp band-saw like teeth. At the other end is the weapon of choice and the reason for its name. That long whip-like tail is capable of amazing speed and awesome damage. I’ve been batted in the belfry while bending over the gunwhale to unhook and release a longtail. That is why I make sure my passengers fight T-sharks until they are totally worn out (the sharks, not the anglers) Once aboard, control the tail and stay away from the mouth. Use a serrated blade to cut the shark into bar-b-que size steaks.