



Mid Atlantic-New England *FishSmart* Workshop Opens New Ground

The final *FishSmart* regional workshop held in Providence, Rhode Island March 13-14 revealed that, unlike the regions covered in earlier workshops, the Mid Atlantic-New England regions are in a position to address the issue of high release mortality in recreational fisheries before it reaches a crisis level.

During the workshop, recreational anglers, industry, and for-hire operators gathered with fisheries managers and scientists in an interactive forum to focus on release techniques, fishing and management practices in fisheries where high release mortality may impede stock sustainability.

With increasing regulations on cod, black sea bass, and other species, the number of fish that anglers are forced to release will likely increase dramatically in the coming years in the Mid Atlantic-New England, creating severe constrictions in recreational fishing opportunities similar to that faced with red snapper stocks in the Gulf of Mexico/South Atlantic and rockfish on Pacific coast. This will bring greater scrutiny to release techniques and the way that these fisheries are managed for recreational anglers. Although many anglers in these regions currently utilize dehooking devices which is considered a “best release practice,” few are aware of, or utilize, tools and techniques, such as recompression devices that may improve the survival of deep caught fish that are released,

Many recreational species in these regions do not have a direct connection between the air bladder and esophagus that would allow them to release gases that expand as they are raised to the surface (a condition called barotrauma) and can benefit from special handling prior to release. Little research on species exhibiting barotrauma effects has been conducted specifically in this region, although black sea bass research has been conducted in the South Atlantic. Several research projects in the region have documented general release techniques that improve survival for all species – including near shore species targeted by small boat and shore-based anglers. During the workshop, researchers presented the results of numerous studies from the west coast, Gulf of Mexico, and South Atlantic documenting that appropriate deep water release techniques can improve the survival of released fish and that these fish retain visual acuity, reproductive viability, and have minimal long term organ damage. However, research is needed to verify these results for specific species and fishing conditions in the Mid Atlantic-New England regions.

Workshop participants recommended several modifications to the general release guidelines that have been evolving from the other workshops. These modifications are designed to stress the importance of initial survival of fish prior to applying any special practices, and to make the guidelines more applicable to near shore boat anglers and shore-based fishing that are prevalent in these regions.

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Presenters at the workshop stressed that improving the survival of released fish was a long term investment in stock sustainability, and that reduced mortality may not be immediately reflected in expanded fishing opportunities. However, reducing any source of mortality is important, particularly as more fish are released either voluntarily or due to regulation.

Finally, workshop participants strongly reiterated the basic tenet of the *FishSmart* effort that anglers should not be discouraged from keeping fish that they are lawfully allowed to keep or to discourage voluntary catch and release. However, where catch and release does occur, anglers should strive to ensure that every fish that is released survives.

The Mid Atlantic-New England *FishSmart* workshop completes a series of regional workshops conducted in the last year that also encompassed the South Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico and Pacific (including west coast, Alaska and Hawaii) regions. This regional approach developed from recommendations made during the 2011 national workshop on improving the survival of released fish, focusing on barotrauma. With the information gathering phase complete, the *FishSmart* effort now shifts focus to communication and implementation of recommendations from the regional workshops.

A full summary of the workshop is posted at www.fishsmart.org.

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