

The walls are decorated with black and white photos, too numerous to count. My heart sinks as I survey the mountains of dead fish in each photo.

It's the same old story that we have all heard hundreds of times. The old man sitting opposite me complains about the poor fishing nowadays. As he rattles on about the huge number of fish he caught in his youth, my mind starts to wander and my eyes scan the walls again. Human nature, I think, why do we have to be so destructive?

ROB SCOTT / PHOTOGRAPHS: ROB SCOTT

Sustainable Fishing Ski Angling – it's in your hands

When the fishing is poor, go into any ski boat club or attend any fishing ski compo and one is bound to hear the same complaint: 'damn long liners are killing our coast', or 'why doesn't the government control the commercial fishing off our coast?' When the fishing happens to be good, however, one sees smiles and piles of dead fish. Ask the elated fishermen if they released any fish and they will probably reply with a quizzical look 'yes, plenty, when the line snapped', or 'why should I release when the commercials are out there catching fish that I let go?'

Long-liners and commercial fishing do have a massive impact on our fishery, but there are also a few aspects to consider on our side of the fence. Most of our inshore target species are not affected by long-liners. The number of recreational users along our coastline







is growing daily. Our 'recreational long line' extends from Sodwana in the north, right down to Cape Town and back up the West Coast to the Namibian border. Our recreational long line has the most extensive crew, with tens of thousands of fishermen participating in sport angling along our coasts. The recreational long line has a fleet of ski boats and fishing skis that dwarf even I&J's fleet. We utilise our recreational resource from the shore break and rock pools, up to 50 nautical miles off our coast. We target every conceivable species, from mullet to marlin. On an individual scale we can't do much damage, but we have to think outside the box and realise that collectively we have massive impact.

A recent fishing ski safari to Inhaca Island prompted me to write this article in an attempt to start changing attitudes, as were our clients' on that trip. In our pre-trip briefing we discussed our preference for catch and release. Releasing fish was met with some apprehension. The concerns

raised by the clients were that they wanted good photos of the fish and they were also anxious about handling toothy fish. With the reassurance of guides carrying cameras and assisting with releasing the fish, we headed north to the emerald treasure chest of Inhaca.

On the first morning, after a short paddle out of Hells Gate channel, it was a matter of seconds after sending our first live bait out before the rod buckled and the reel started to scream. After a few minutes and a couple of blistering runs, a respectable shoal cotta was brought next to the ski. Instead of gaffing the fish, it was tailed and pulled up onto the ski. The head held firmly and the treble was removed with a pair of long-nosed pliers. A quick photo and the cotta was back in the water next to the ski. After a little reviving, it swam off strongly. By now, everyone who had a bait in the water was into a fish. The two-way

exceptional considering the two guides hardly had any time to test the waters for themselves. A wide number of species were landed, mostly cotta, as well as some outstanding golden kingies, GTs, kakaap and some near-record queenfish. Over the four days of fishing we killed only eight fish. A few of these were harvested from the ocean on orders from our stomachs, and a few died either from fighting for too long or the notorious 'deep throat' hook-up, resulting in bleeding gills. This equates to a successful release rate of over 95%. After handling all those fish, in those often frantic moments, we didn't experience one bite from a fish, or one jab from a hook.

The most rewarding part of the trip, for me, was to see how quickly the clients' attitudes changed towards the releasing of fish. The mind shift from 'get the fish in the hatch' to 'get the fish back in the water' was fantastic.

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radios on each ski were blaring as the banter bounced between everyone on the water. The feeding frenzy was more than obvious, with cotta and GTs following hooked fish up to the skis. In all the excitement, fish were being released with lightning speed, due to the fact that the sooner a fish could be taken off the hook, the sooner a new one could be attached.

On this particular safari we had possibly some of the best sport angling ever achieved off skis. Between three clients and two guides we managed to boat over 150 fish in four days; pretty

The method for releasing fish off a ski is simple. Try wearing a glove to tail the fish, as one's hands take a beating when handling a large fish or many fish. Be organised. Keep everything that you need in its place so that when you need it, you know where to look. When you have a cotta on your lap you don't want to be looking for your long-nosed pliers. Be decisive. It is obvious that hesitation has no place in these situations. Be firm and hold the fish tightly. A good tool to carry is a Boga grip, but it is not essential. When holding the fish on the base of the gills, beware





that your fingers don't slip through into the fish's teeth or gills. Be wary of the hooks. Try placing a wet cloth over the fish's eyes, especially with species like bonito, tuna and dorado. If the fish are biting wild, squash your barbs, or change your trebles for single hooks. Once the fish is off the hook, make sure it has been sufficiently revived before the release. Once you have released one or two fish, you won't believe how easy it becomes and how satisfying it is.

While discussing catch and release, an American client put it nicely in a nutshell: 'Why would I kill something that I love: that's like prostituting your sister!'

Don't get me wrong, I am the first one to put a fish in the hatch. After all there is nothing like a fresh couta or snoek on the braai. The difference lies between keeping one fish or ten. If you have read this article up to here, I can virtually guarantee that you love the ocean. I am sure that the sport of fishing is a huge focus in many of your lives. Let's all utilise our beautiful coast and its resources responsibly. We need to, as individuals, recognise the difference between utilisation and exploitation. I dread the day I have to explain to my grandchildren how good the fishing was in my youth. ∞



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