

Scottish Sea Angling Conservation Network

Training Manual for

Handling small sharks

Supported by the Scottish Shark Tagging Programme



SSACN – Small Shark Handling

Code of best practice

This code of best practice has been prepared to assist anglers catch and return small sharks in a way that best ensures they survive the process. It applies most particularly to Spurdog, (Maximum landing limit 100cm), Starry Smoothhound, Bull Huss and Small Spotted Catshark (doggie or LSD)

The majority of small shark angling is carried out from boats and this code of conduct is written taking this into account but we would ask shore anglers to specifically look at **section 12**.

1) Introduction

Whilst small sharks 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 fishing for small sharks but most importantly cause the minimum of damage to any you are lucky enough to encounter.

Releasing any shark without taking it out of the water is the preferred option.

It is worth remembering that the sharp spines on spurdog are used by the fish as defensive weapon and these can easily pierce a wellington boot. **In one instance the spine caused a wound on an angler that required 18 stitches** so extreme care is required when handling them.

The skin on small sharks can leave painful long lasting burns to exposed areas so ensure you hold the fish with two hands

A gut hooked fish is usually down to bad angling practice and should be avoided by striking early.

2) Be prepared

It is essential that you are prepared for any eventuality when landing any shark

It sounds obvious, but the time taken to find buried tools in tackle boxes or under a pile of clothing means the fish 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.

Time is the vital factor that may dictate whether the fish will survive the capture and subsequent release

3) Hook sizes

The use of bronze finished hooks is the singularly most important factor in the release of deep-hooked sharks as any hook that has to be left in a fish will dissolve rapidly.

A size 4/0, is recommended, for most species either barb-less or with the barb crushed to facilitate the unhooking process



As lip hooking significantly reduces the likelihood of a hook being left in the fish the use of circle hooks should also be considered.

4) Traces

The use of the right trace is important. Losing a fish because of an inappropriate trace increases the likelihood of fish mortality due to trailing line.

The trace for a spurdog should be at least one metre of 40 kg nylon with a biting length of 200mms of 25 kg wire; a small length of wire is essential for spurdog but 25 kg mono will suffice for the Huss, rays, and smooth hound.

5) When to strike

It is essential to strike early to avoid a deep hooked fish. A gut hooked fish is usually down to bad angling practice, it is better to miss the bite than gut hook the fish.

6) Releasing at the side of the boat- *This is the preferred method*

The recommended option is to release the fish in the water 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 barb-less hook or crushed barb makes this a simple task.

As sharks have a long gestation period then there is a good chance any large female you encounter will be pregnant so extra care must be taken to avoid the fish aborting through stress.

Small sharks are not an aggressive or vicious despite the look of their teeth or spines - simply treat with caution. Do not attempt to handle by trying to wrap the head and tail in a single grip as is commonly done with the LSD.

7) To leave the hook in or not?

There are occasions, all though this is often down to inexperience or bad angling practice when, the spurdog 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 sharks will lose the hook eventually (providing it is not stainless steel) 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 preferable to land the fish to safely remove the hook.

8) Bringing the fish on board

If you need to land the fish then the safety of both the fish and the angler is paramount.

Remember sharks have no ribcage and the water pressure keeps all the vital organs in place.

Dragging a fish backwards or holding it by the tail can easily rupture the internal organs. It may swim off fine but die a few days later.

To remove the fish from the water 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.

When you cannot reach the fish, a large, landing net should be used, taking care to lower the fish gently onto the deck or land.

A wet cloth or towel soaked in sea water should be placed over the head ensuring the eyes are fully covered; this usually pacifies small sharks and makes the removal of the hook with a disgorgor or long nosed pliers an easier and safer procedure.

Avoid holding sharks in a death grip from behind the head as the fingers and thumb can crush the gill structures. A gentle grip either on the snout (neoprene gloves give an excellent grip) or behind the gill area will do the trick.

A foot placed either side of the body can help minimise squirming while unhooking. Where an angler is fishing alone it is recommended that all fish are released in the water, either by using a T bar or cutting the line close to the fish.

In no circumstances is the use of a gaff recommended. It is not necessary and seriously damages fish.

9) Weighing a fish.

If the sharks are to be weighed, the preferred method is by the use of a suitably sized weighing sling laid out beforehand.

The fish should be placed in this sling immediately it is unhooked, ensuring that unsupported movement is restricted. Ensure that the fish is placed evenly within the sling before lifting

10) Photographing the fish

When photographing and returning the fish remember to keep the fish horizontal, with the abdomen supported by the arms and the tail grasped firmly.

11) Releasing the fish.

When releasing the fish, hold the head of the fish 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.



12) Shore anglers

Where sharks are targeted from the shore, the general comments on unhooking, fish handling and photography still apply.

Extra care must be taken when fishing for sharks from the shore for both the safety of the angler and for the well being of the fish.

A shore angler needs to work out well in advance, how he is physically going to deal with a fish that is likely to be in excess of 10 pounds. The time taken to drag the fish to a suitable and safe platform could be the crucial for the tope's survival.

It is not acceptable to drag the fish vertically (either head or tail first) up rocks or a pier for reasons outlined in **section 8** which suggests; it is essential you try and bring the fish in horizontally, with arms supporting the abdomen if possible. Failure to do this can easily rupture the internal organs. The tope may swim off fine but die a few days later.

13) Conclusion

Sharks are a powerful, active fish and their teeth are as sharp as razor blades and will instantly bite a finger to the bone and their spines can cause severe damage to the angler.

The best practice for angler and fish is to remove the hook whilst the fish is still in the water, 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.

Enjoy the fishing but please remember respect must be given to these magnificent sharks at all times.

By following this code, you will help preserve the stocks of these magnificent fighting fish for generations to come.



This code of conduct was produced by the :

Scottish Sea Angling Conservation Network (www.ssacn.org).

It may be freely distributed with the normal acknowledgements.

