

Muskies, Release Them Right

by Larry Ramsell, Muskie Guide

Over the past twenty to twenty-five years, muskie anglers have progressed from "catch and keep" to "catch and release" anglers. This great trend has done wonders to enhance north america's muskie fisheries. In the "old days" the average size of kept muskies was in the 34 inch range. Now due to catch and release, the average size here in the Hayward area is pushing or exceeding 40 inches! The "good ol' days" are NOW! Not only has the average size of our muskies increased greatly, there are more "trophy" sized muskies available and being caught by anglers.

One of the biggest problems encountered along the way has been teaching anglers how to properly handle the muskie they have caught to ensure its survival once released. While capturing that long sought after muskie is foremost in anglers minds, for the majority of anglers that intend to safely release a muskie after capturing it, the "how to" is equally important, so I would like to address that here.

While the majority of muskie fisherfolks net their fish, how and what to do next is often the problem. First of all, one must make sure that they have the proper "tools" on board to accomplish this task.

The new muskie nets of today are more fish friendly, with coated netting to prevent the lures hooks from become hopelessly entangled. The Stowmaster or Beckman muskie nets, available at places like Pastika's Sport Shop in Hayward, cannot be beat. They can be used like a "holding pen" for the fish, by leaving the fish in it environment, the water, at the side of the boat.

Additional tools, like the Baker Hook-out and a good set of small bolt cutters are also a necessity. The hook-out allows the angler to get at the hooks without getting hands too close to the muskies sharp teeth and gills. For fish that are hooked too solidly to remove with the hook-out, the bolt cutters come into play. A 25 cent hook is a small price to pay for the safe release of King Esox! Some angler use a "fish glove" to help handle the fish and hold it for a QUICK photo session, I STRONGLY recommend the Musky Armor Gloves (www.muskyarmor.com), no more gill raker cuts on the backs of your fingers!

Before you remove your fish from the net, make sure to have the camera ready to shoot, and keep the fish out of the water no longer than you can hold your breath! And please, do not place your fish in or out of the net, on the bottom of the boat. Not only will this remove the layer of protective slime on the fish that protects it from bacterial disease, they will often thrash around and injure themselves, creating havoc with tackle as well.

After the photo's are taken, gently place your muskie back in the water and hold them upright. If when you let them go they turn sideways or upside down, they may need to be "burped". Muskies swim bladder is below center, and some tired muskies cannot overcome excess air contained therein. Should this be the case, hold your fish's back against the side of the boat by the tail and using the other hand, gently press the stomach starting near the anal fin and push along the stomach towards the head. This will help to remove the excess air from the bladder and give the muskie a much better chance of regaining its equilibrium and swimming away in good shape.

Please remember, the best intentions aside, a released muskie's chances of survival after release are only as good as the methods you use. Take the extra steps necessary and make sure you have the proper tools before leaving the dock, and my your next muskie be the fish of a lifetime!

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