

Dolphinfish Research Program™

May 2015



By: Don Hammond

How to Increase Your Tag Recovery Rate

There are some ardent dolphin taggers out there who have tagged more than 100 fish and have not had one of their fish reported recovered. Then there are those taggers who have had a recovery after tagging no more than five fish. Chance does play a major role in a tagged dolphin being recovered, but there are many things that anglers can do to enhance the odds of their fish being recovered.

The following lists six steps fishermen should follow to significantly increase the odds that their fish will be recaptured. The **first** action fishermen should take when starting to fish is locate the tag kit, make sure there is a tag in the applicator, and that you know where the associated card is that matches the tag number. Have these in an easy-to-reach location.



The use of circle hooks increases the likelihood that the hook will catch in the corner of the mouth.

The **second** action anglers can take to ensure healthy fish for tagging is to use circle hooks. It does take some practice to learn to use these hooks properly, but once you learn, you will lose fewer fish and have few fish deep-hooked or hooked in the gills.



A tag inserted just under the skin, as shown above, will result in the tag being shed within a few days. This is a virtual waste of the tag.

The **third** action taggers can take is to insert the tag deeply into the fish to provide a secure implant. Shallow tagging is a common problem that results in the tag being shed just days after it is released. The tag should be inserted into the dorsal muscle about one-third the fish's length behind the head. It should be inserted at a 45° angle toward the head and deep enough so that the barb of the tag passes between the fish's spines from the backbone. This allows the barb to lock around a spine, securing it in the fish.

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A tag locked around a dorsal spine will remain with the fish for its life. This 49-pound dolphin was tagged 18 months earlier as an eight-pounder and the tag is still firmly attached.

The **fourth** action is simply choosing not to tag seriously injured fish. Fish that remain out of the water for more than one minute, or those that are deeply hooked or bleeding, should not be tagged. While these fish will swim off, they will likely die a short time later (latent mortality).



Fish that are losing a lot of blood indicate that they have sustained a serious injury and should not be tagged.

The **fifth** action fishermen need to take is to handle the fish gently. I know that is saying to be gentle with a fish that is trying to beat the tar out of you. Grasping the fish in its gut region or gill area and forcefully holding it there will likely inflict significant damage to its organs or its gills. Either way it will be dead a short time later. It is best to throw a wet towel over the eyes of a fish that has escaped into the cockpit. Once the fish's eyes are covered it will normally calm down. Also tags should never be placed near or in the gut cavity, gills, or the head. Tags in these areas will also lead to an early death.



Fish do not cooperate when being tagged, which can result in fishermen having to use strong force to control them. This can lead to serious internal injury and later to death.

The **sixth** action anglers can take to maximize recovery chances is to use a dipnet to lift the fish out of the water. Using a net reduces the chance of injuring the lower throat area, which has many blood vessels that supply blood to the gills, critical to the fish's breathing. Once in the net the fish has little chance of escaping into the cockpit, which is a big plus. This shortens the time that the fish is out of the water.



The use of a dipnet to lift the fish out of the water reduces the chances of injury and helps prevent the fish's escaping into the boat's cockpit.

A dipnet offers other advantages in controlling the fish. It allows the angler to easily tag the fish and remove the hook. Small school fish can even be measured without being removed. This all adds up to a quicker return to the water for the fish. A dipnet with rubber webbing is the most fish-friendly and easiest to get the hooks out of.

The Dolphinfish Research Program needs your financial support. No federal funds support this important research. This program exists because of private donations.

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Using a net to lift the fish into the boat minimizes damage from the hook and, with a cloth over the fish's eyes, gives the fisherman full control of the fish while tagging.

None of these actions involve rocket science, nor do they require much additional effort on the part of the fisherman. Just a little bit of planning and preparation will make tagging dolphin easier and more fun while producing a healthier fish for science.

Do Dolphin Anglers Support Fishery Welfare?

If asked, I would have to say that they do. Waiting for government to get around to studying a stock of fish is fishery welfare. The lack of private financial support for the DRP from the vast number the offshore anglers who fish for dolphin suggests that they are content with the government's management of the sport fisheries.

In 2014 the DRP received financial support from only 55 individuals, clubs, businesses, and foundations. Donations last year were at an all-time low, and yet the program's discoveries about dolphinfish, along with the number of fish tagged, were at one of its highest points. Last month we revealed the first documented migration route for a dolphin traveling from the East Coast to the Caribbean.

Every offshore boat owner who fishes for dolphin should donate \$100 to support this important research each year. Today, two quality offshore lures rigged out cost that much. I would think that fishermen would place a much higher value on being able to catch fish that they can bring home. Dolphinfish has long been those fish.

Donations to the DRP are fully tax deductible, thanks to the Hilton Head Reef Foundation, a registered 501 (c) 3 organization that works with the study receiving donations for the program. To make a donation, the check should be

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How important is catching dolphin to you?

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