

Circle Hooks

REDUCE
CATCH AND RELEASE
MORTALITY



**New Hampshire
Fish and Game Department**
www.wildlife.state.nh.us

COMPOSITE IMAGE © ETHAN GORDON PHOTO 2001

CIRCLE HOOKS REDUCE MORTALITY

To help conserve fisheries along the Atlantic coast, many sport anglers now release the fish they catch. Numbers of anglers also have switched from using standard j-hooks to circle hooks – and the benefits to our fisheries show great promise.

Studies Show They Save Fish

Recent studies conducted by marine officials in Massachusetts and Maryland compared the post-release death rates of striped bass caught with circle hooks to those caught with the standard j-hooks used by most anglers fishing with bait. When circle hooks were used, only 3% of the fish in the Massachusetts study and 0.8% in the Maryland study later died. By comparison, when j-hooks were used, 15.5% of the fish in the Massachusetts study and 9.1% in the Maryland study died after being released.

Based on these studies, the impact of bait fishermen switching to the use of circle hooks could be substantial. For example, in 1999 it was estimated that recreational anglers released over 12 million striped bass, with roughly one million

of those fish succumbing to hook and release mortality from bait, lure, and fly fishermen combined. If the use of circle hooks resulted in even a 50% reduction in overall hook and release mortality, roughly 500,000 fish would have been saved.

The Design is the Key

Experienced striped bass anglers have found that when fishing with baited circle hooks, the fish they catch almost always are hooked in the lip or jaw. This is due to the design of circle hooks. On a circle hook, the point is turned inward to a much greater degree than on a j-hook. Because of this feature, circle hooks must catch on an exposed edge of a fish's mouth, such as a corner of the jaw. Points on j-hooks, in contrast, are more exposed and are able to lodge in a greater number of places, including the gills, throat and stomach. Injuries to these internal organs often can be fatal.

Because of their design, you don't need to "set" a circle hook as you would a j-hook; you simply need to let the fish "take" the bait and then start reeling in the line to get a

hook-up. Many longtime anglers believe they actually catch more fish with circle hooks than j-hooks, once they've trained themselves to use them properly.

Many Styles and Sizes

Most tackle shops along New Hampshire's seacoast now offer circle hooks in various styles and sizes. Anglers experienced in the use of circle hooks recommend that you buy circle hooks with a bend size that is comparable to the j-hooks you now use. Also, fisheries managers recommend that you buy hooks without offset points, because such points hook fish in a wider variety of anatomical sites. Although originally developed for use with bait, several new salt-water lures and flies now feature circle hooks. If your favorite tackle shop doesn't offer these products, please ask them to start carrying them.

Part of Fish and Game's charge in managing marine fisheries is to reduce the unnecessary waste of our valued sport fish resources. Using circle hooks is one way anglers can help.

To learn more about circle hooks and their effectiveness, visit the World Wide Web at www.dnr.state.md.us/fisheries/recreational/crsb.html.

COMMON QUESTIONS... AND SOME ANSWERS:

Q. What makes circle hooks different from j-hooks?

A. On a circle hook the point is turned inward to a much greater degree than on a j-hook (see figure). The vast majority of fish caught with circle hooks are caught on a corner of the jaw. J-hook points are more exposed and are able to lodge in a greater variety of sites, like the stomach, gills or esophagus. This results in internal bleeding and, most commonly, death of the fish.



Q. Are circle hooks more difficult to use?

A. While circle hooks are slightly more difficult to bait, by slowly rotating the hook point into the bait you should have few problems. When removing the hook from a fish, the reverse action is needed. The hook needs to be rotated to back it out of the fish. Also, you should lose fewer hooks due to swallowing of the bait or cutoffs from other species, such as bluefish.

Q. Do I need to modify my angling technique to make circle hooks work effectively?

A. As a result of the way a circle hook works, you have to break one of the most basic angling habits – jerking the rod tip to set the hook. If you jerk the rod tip, you'll simply pull a circle hook out of the fish's mouth with little or no chance of a hook up. *Anglers experienced in using circle hooks say that you need to let the fish "take" the bait and then simply start reeling in the line to get a hook-up.*

Q. What kind of circle hooks should I buy?

A. We recommend you purchase them with a bend size comparable to the j-hooks you now use, since manufacturers size circle hooks differently than j-hooks and different manufacturers use different measuring standards. We also recommend the purchase of circle hooks without an offset-point since points on these hooks, like those on j-hooks, catch fish in a wider variety of anatomical sites.

Q. Where can I get more information on circle hooks?

A. Contact New Hampshire Fish and Game's Marine Fisheries Division at (603) 868-1095.



A primary goal with all the state's fisheries is to limit the number of released fish that die. Using circle hooks is one way anglers can help.



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