

**Help Texas** maintain its world-class fishing reputation by safely releasing your catch. When you safely release a fish back into the water, you are helping keep our fish populations healthy for generations to come.

Many marine reef fish have a gas-filled organ called a swim bladder or air bladder that controls buoyancy and allows the fish to maintain a certain depth in the water column. When you bring a fish to the surface quickly with a hook and line, the gas in the swim bladder expands. If the fish is released in this condition, it may not be able to re-submerge, making it an easy target for predators – and defeating the purpose of its release. You may need to depressurize the fish by gently puncturing the swim bladder or using a descending tool to return it to its proper depth.



Texas Sea Grant/Seth Patterson

For more information, contact a TPWD Coastal Fisheries field office near you. <https://tpwd.texas.gov/about/administration-divisions/coastal-fisheries/field-offices>

Publication supported in part by an Institutional Grant (NA18OAR4170088) to the Texas Sea Grant College Program from the National Sea Grant Office, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce.

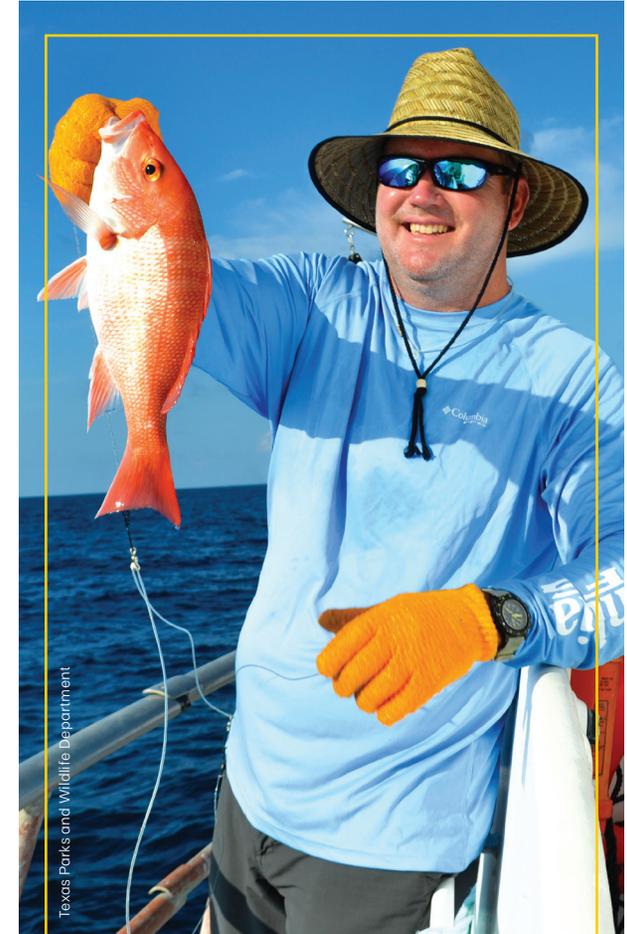
TAMU-SG-18-509 June 2018 11M  
TTI.TSG1820.5425.0518



AT TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY



Life's better outside.®



Texas Parks and Wildlife Department

## Catch and Release of Reef Fish

Not every catch is a keeper.



Texas Sea Grant/Seth Patterson

## When to Intervene

When a fish is caught in deep water and brought to the surface, the sudden change in pressure may cause its air bladder to overinflate. This can lead to a condition called **barotrauma** where the eyes bulge, the belly swells, and the fish may float helplessly.

After reeling in a fish, observe its condition. You should vent the fish's swim bladder or use a descending tool if:

- it is bloated,
- it has bulging eyes or bubbling scales,
- its intestine is distended,
- it is floating or unable to right itself, or
- its stomach is protruding out of its mouth.



Florida Sea Grant

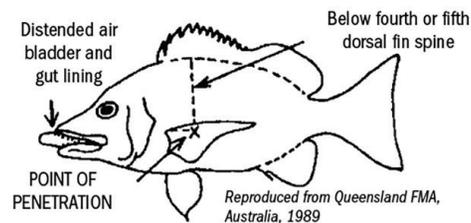


Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant

## Venting

Venting involves gently puncturing the swim bladder. By releasing the internal pressure from the body cavity, the fish can swim back down to capture depth.

- Hold the fish gently but firmly on its side.
- Gently insert a thin, sharp, hollow instrument or an approved device at a 45-degree angle through the side of the fish immediately behind the upper part of the pectoral finbase. This is usually directly below the fourth or fifth spine.
- Only insert the tool deep enough to release the gases – and to avoid puncturing vital organs.
- Let the air escape without pressing on the fish. The sound of the escaping gas is audible and deflation is noticeable.
- Return the fish to the water as soon as possible. Revive the fish by holding it with the head pointed downward or facing into the current, and move the fish back and forth to gently force water into the mouth and over the gills.
- Watch the fish when it is released. If it doesn't swim away, recover it, and try again.



Always vent on the side of the fish. Even if the fish's stomach is protruding out of its mouth, do not puncture it or attempt to push it back into the fish's body.

## Venting Tools

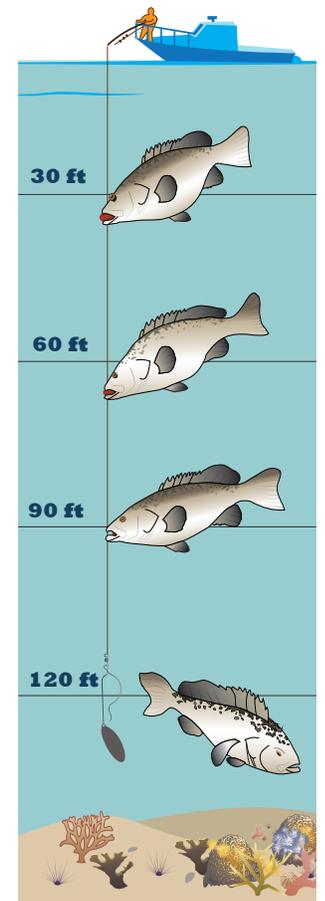
There are multiple types of venting tools that can be used to depressurize a saltwater fish. A venting tool is a sharpened, hollow instrument that helps release gas from the fish's body cavity. You can make a venting tool or purchase one from a fish gear retailer. Be alert when using any sharp object on the water.

Ice picks and knives are not suitable because simply puncturing the fish is inadequate and can result in a mortal injury.

Chlorine bleach is a good disinfectant to use when cleaning a venting tool between uses.

## Descending Tools

Descending tools are another option to safely release a fish after capture. This technique does not puncture the fish's body cavity like using a venting tool. In this approach, a specially designed release tool is used to descend the fish to its capture depths for a safe release. As the fish descends, the gas in its swim bladder compresses and it can swim away and recover. Examples of these tools include a pressurized release hook, a weighted milk crate, an S-shaped wire hook clip and a weighted spring-release tool.



Florida Sea Grant