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Fall is the traditional time for anglers to pursue spotted sea trout in the Delta and coastal rivers of Mobile Bay.

Most of the trout found in these areas are small and many are below or close to the legal limit of 14 inches. This means that many of the trout caught need to be returned to the water because they are too small. Since some fish are injured during the catch-and-release process, the wisdom of making fishermen release undersized spotted sea trout is often questioned. A number of studies have shown that the survival of released fish is higher than some anglers think.

In a recent Mississippi study, 78 spotted sea trout under 14 inches were caught with live bait on single hooks. The fish were handled with bare hands and hooks removed by hand or with pliers. All the fish were placed in a large round cage tied to a pier for three days.

At the end of three days, only three fish had died. Among the survivors were three fish that had been gut-hooked and the line cut leaving the hook in place.

Most spotted sea trout can survive catch-and-release particularly if a few precautions are taken:

- ◆ Land the fish quickly
- ◆ Have a wet towel or glove and long nose pliers or hemostats ready
- ◆ Handle the fish gently but firmly and remove the hook as fast as possible

- ◆ Back the hook out the way it went in
- ◆ Cut the leader close to the mouth of the fish if the fish has been deeply hooked
- ◆ Place the fish gently in the water for release