

SEA GRANT

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Releasing fish alive has become a greater issue for red snapper fishermen as new bag limits go into affect. Most fishermen understand how to safely remove hooks, handle fish with care and release fish to the water quickly. However, snapper and grouper caught from deeper waters can benefit from an additional step. That step is venting.

All snapper and grouper have a swim bladder which is a balloon-like organ that holds gas. Fish control the amount of gas in the swim bladder to maintain neutral buoyancy at the depth they are living in but cannot change the amount of gas quickly.

When a fish with a swim bladder is rapidly pulled to the surface, gas in the swim bladder quickly expands as the water pressure decreases. At or near the surface, the bladder may burst releasing gas into the body cavity. Gas in the body cavity makes a fish overly buoyant and unable to readily swim back to the bottom. Trapped at the surface and unable to maneuver, these fish are very vulnerable to predation and have low survival.

Fishermen can release the gas from the body cavity by using a venting tool. The simplest venting tool is a 16 gauge needle attached to a large syringe with the plunger removed. The plunger must be removed to let the gas out.

When a fish that is going to be released comes up from deep water, handle the fish gently with a wet towel. Place the fish on its side and insert the needle towards the

head at a 45 degree angle into the body cavity just behind the pectoral fin. The pectoral fin is the fin behind the head and the side of the body. Insert the needle only deep enough to release the gas. You can hear the escaping gas and deflation of the fish is often noticeable. Quickly return the fish to the water. Do not attempt to use an ice pick or a knife to release the gas. They do not work and will add to the physiological stress and injury from hooking.

One more thing – fishermen often think that the object sticking out the mouth of fish brought up from the depths is the swim bladder and puncture it. That object is the stomach and it should never be punctured. The stomach will return to normal, in time, after the gas is released.