
MINIMUM STANDARDS FOR SAFE HANDLING AND LIVE RELEASE PROCEDURES

The primary aim of the following Minimum Standards for Safe Handling and Live Release Procedures is to ensure the highest level of survival of sharks and that, whenever possible, prompt, and effective action will be taken to return the shark to the sea and prioritising that the life and safety of the crew is not compromised and that crew members shall endeavour to avoid hazards in the safe handling and release operations for sharks. The following minimum standards are appropriate for all live sharks when released whether under no-retention policies, or when released voluntarily. These basic guidelines do not replace any stricter safety rules that may have been established by the National Authorities of individual CPCs.

To maximise the efficacy and utility of adopted BHRPs, CPCs should ensure crew are educated and trained on these practices regularly and enough crew members are available to focus on releasing bycaught sharks by applying the adopted BHRP. Illustrated best handling and release practices should be available on the vessels.

Safety first: These minimum standards should be considered in light of safety and practicability for crew. Crew safety should always come first. At a minimum, crew should wear suitable gloves and avoid working around the mouths of sharks. Also minimising manual handling and using appropriate technical release devices instead is preferable to ensure safety of the crew and the animals at the same time.

Be prepared: Tools should be prepared in advance that are always onboard and ready to be used prior to setting or hauling in fishing gear (listed at the end of this document).

General recommendations for all fisheries

- When entangled (in netting, fishing line, etc.), if safe to do so, carefully cut the net/line free from the animal and release to the sea as quickly as possible with no entanglements attached.
- If, for whatever reason, a shark must be brought on the deck then minimise the time it takes to return it to the water to increase survival and reduce risks to the crew.

Longline fisheries specific safe-handling practices

- If operationally safe to do so, stop the vessel or substantially reduce its speed.
- Bring the shark as close to the vessel as possible without putting too much tension on the branch line to avoid that a released hook or branch line break could shoot hook, weights and other parts toward the vessels and crew at high speed.
- Secure the far side of the longline mainline to the boat to avoid any remaining gear in the water pulling on the line and the animal. Avoid bringing the shark onboard for gear removal whenever possible; bringing sharks onboard should not be attempted for vessels with a high freeboard >1m (i.e. too high for crew members to reach the water).
- If hooked, and the hook is visible in the body or mouth, use a dehooking device or long-handled bolt cutter to remove the hook barb, and then remove the hook as much as possible.
- If attempting to remove hooks, use pliers or dehookers or long-handled de-hookers for vessels with high freeboards (i.e. > 1 meter).
- If it is not possible to remove the hook or the hook cannot be seen, cut the line of the trace (or snood, leader) as close to the hook or mouth as possible leaving no more than 1 meter of gear attached to the animal and with no weights attached to the animal).
- If sharks must be brought on board for gear removal (on vessels with a freeboard height of less than 1 m), if possible:

– Use a net, lasso or second point of attachment to help lift them onboard

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- Manoeuvre shark using manual restraint of the pectoral fins and the caudal peduncle (this may require two crew members depending on the size of the animals)
 - Use a stretcher or cradle for handling and restraint for the safety of the crew and to reduce injury to the animal.
 - Return the animals to the sea as quickly as possible.

Do not:

- Use drag or lazy lines or drag sharks behind the vessel until the hook rips free of the jaw or until the animal is easier to handle.
- Electrocute or stun sharks.
- Lift sharks onboard without a net or second point of attachment to support the weight of the animal, noting it is not recommended to lift sharks onboard the vessel.
- Attempt to remove a hook from a live shark if the hook is not visible.
- Cut into or damage the jaw to remove hooks.
- Lift or maneuver sharks by the gill slits, or spiracles.
- Insert gaffs, hooks, or similar instruments into the bodies of live sharks.
- Lift and drop sharks from the vessel height to rip the hook from the shark's jaw.

Purse seine fisheries specific safe-handling practices

For whale sharks

- Whale sharks should remain in the water when being released.
- The release of whale sharks should be prioritized prior to brailing or when the shark surfaces.
- If a whale shark is encountered the net roll must be immediately stopped to release the whale shark
- If the head of the animal points to the stern of the boat, a crewmember should be available to open the net and/or cut a few meters of net in front of the shark's mouth to release it.
- If the head of the animal points towards the bow of the boat, the crew in charge of the net hauling operation could manoeuvre the winch and the capstan to bring the whale shark close to the hull, then stand the animal on the net to roll it outside the sack corkline. If the individual does not swim out of the net by itself, a rope can be placed under the animal and attached to the float line to help rolling the animal out of the net
- Small whale sharks of less than 2 m, 'brailing' may be used to release the animal from the net without bringing it on board

Do not

- Bring the animal on board of the vessel regardless of size.
- Start the brailing process for the catch while the shark is still in the purse seine net
- Attempt brailing sharks of more than 2 m for release
- Pull or tow a whale shark by the tail or caudal peduncle or by a loop hooked around its gills
- Leave towing ropes attached to the trunk of the animal
- Gaff whale sharks or bore holes into a fin

For all sharks

Releasing sharks from a purse seine net

- Scan the net as far ahead as possible to spot the sharks early to react quickly.⁷ Avoid lifting them up in the net towards the power block. Allow the entangled animal to be removed from the net. If necessary, use clippers to cut the net.

⁷ Survival rates of sharks entangled in the net during haul back can still be higher than 80% (Poisson et al. 2014a; Hutchinson et al. 2015; Onandia et al. 2021) if the sharks are released early in the net hauling process and returned to the sea immediately.

- The net area containing the entangled shark, should be rolled over the turntable and then the main boom should be moved to starboard or to port (depending on the vessel's orientation) and the net should be rolled back (or 'dropped') so that the shark is lowered to the deck and not thrashing in the air on a rolling vessel.
- Once the net has been dropped and the entangled shark is lowered to the deck the crew should safely cut the net away from the animal.
- Sharks should be manoeuvred by hand following best practices guidelines or into a stretcher/cradle or ramp immediately and take them to the opposite side of the vessel from the net for immediate release.
- If a portable or fixed ramp is available for release this should be wetted and the sharks can be released via this device directly to the sea.⁸

Releasing sharks if in the brailer or on deck:

- Vessels should, whenever possible separate bycatch on the working/main deck before passing the loading hatch.⁹
- When safety conditions are met, sharks may be handled manually, following established best practice guidelines.¹⁰
- Use a purpose-built large-mesh cargo net or canvas sling or similar device. If the vessel layout allows, these sharks could also be released by emptying the brail directly on a hopper and release ramp held up at an angle that connects to an opening on the top deck railing, without need to be lifted or handled by the crew.
- Manoeuvre sharks into a stretcher/cradle or ramp immediately and release it on the opposite side of the vessel from the net.
- The crew member should release the shark from the deck whenever possible, avoiding its entry into the lower deck, where the release process becomes longer and potentially more dangerous and complex in the absence of lower deck gutters.
- In cases when the passage of sharks through the loading hatch can't be avoided, sharks should be released as quickly as possible (e.g. via a bycatch waste chute, or via using stretchers).

Do not

- Roll sharks through the power block.
- Use gaffs or hooks to manoeuvre sharks.
- Leave sharks abandoned on deck.
- Hang sharks by the tail.
- Drag sharks across the deck by the tail.
- Allow visible sharks to pass through the loading hatch

Gillnet fisheries specific safe-handling practices

⁸ The use of the ramp can reduce time on board to about 2 minutes showing similar on deck mortality as previously reported by Onandia et al (2021) and an increased chance of post release survival for both silky sharks and oceanic whitetip sharks, thereby providing a cheaper alternative to double conveyor belts although so far sample size for these portable release ramps has been very limited (Murua et al. 2025).

⁹ Effective bycatch separation methods and Bycatch Reduction Devices such as double conveyer belts or hoppers with a controlled door and a ramp extension (Murua et al. 2022; Onandia 2021; Poisson et al. 2014b) should be installed on board and mobile devices should be used on smaller vessels. Alternatively mobile devices that can be connected without the need of human handling of the animals such as suggested by Murua et al. (2025) could be used.

¹⁰ Best practice guidelines for manual handling of sharks can be found in the following documents: Poisson et al., 2012 (https://www.azti.es/atuneroscongeladores/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/MADE_Practices_to_reduce_shark_mortality_purse_seiners_EN.pdf)

Murua et al., 2025. New best handling and release practice guide for vulnerable bycatch tropical species in tropical tuna purse seiners ([IOTC-2025-WPEB21\(AS\)-35](#))

Existing recommendations for best handling and release of sharks that must not be retained and are unwanted is limited but should at least attempt to:

- Prioritize release of live non-retained sharks.
- Leave sharks in the water for gear removal.
- Carefully cut the net away from the animal, allowing it to swim away from the gear.
- Ensure the weight of the net below the entangled animal is supported during gear removal.

DO NOT (all fisheries)

- To the greatest extent practicable, lift sharks from the water using the branch line, especially if hooked unless it is necessary to lift sharks for species identification.
- Lift sharks using thin wires or cables, or by the tail alone.
- Strike a shark against any surface to remove the animal from the line.
- Attempt to dislodge a hook that is deeply ingested and not visible.
- Try to remove a hook by pulling sharply on the branch line.
- Cut the tail or any other body part.
- Cut or punch holes through the shark.
- Gaff or kick a shark, or insert hands into the gill slits.
- Expose the shark to the sun for extended periods.
- Wrap your fingers, hands or arms in the line when bringing a shark or ray to the boat (may result in serious injury).

Useful tools for safe handling and release

- Gloves (shark skin is rough; ensures safe handling of shark and protects crew's hands from bites)
- Towel or cloth (a towel or cloth soaked in seawater can be placed on the eyes of the shark; used to calm sharks down)
- Shark harness, stretcher or cradle
- Saltwater hose (If anticipated that it may require more than 5 minutes to release a shark, then place a hose into its mouth so seawater is moderately flowing into it. Make sure deck pump has been running several minutes before placing it in a sharks mouth)

Purse seine

- Portable release ramp that can be attached to a release door and wetted with an attached hose
- Hopper with ramps
- Bycatch sorting devices for work deck/main deck (e.g. hopper with a door, ramp).
- Bycatch/waste chute on lower/well deck
- Stretcher

Longlines

- Net
- Pliers
- Short handled de-hooker
- Long-handled de-hooker (equal or greater in length than the vessel's freeboard)
- Line cutter- capable of cutting through all lines used in the gear
- Long-handled line cutter (equal or greater in length than the vessel's freeboard)
- Wire/bolt cutter capable of cutting all hooks used on the vessel

Gillnets

- Net cutter – capable of cutting through the net/gear
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