

BEST PRACTICE HANDLING AND RELEASE GUIDELINES – MASTER DOCUMENT (DRAFT 1)

SHARKS (ALL)

Note: The following guidelines were adopted during WPEB and endorsed by SC in 2025

MINIMUM STANDARDS FOR SAFE HANDLING AND LIVE RELEASE PROCEDURES FOR SHARKS

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
 - 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.
- 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

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

MOBULIDS

Note: the following were adopted during WPEB and endorsed by SC in 2025

MINIMUM STANDARDS FOR SAFE HANDLING AND LIVE RELEASE PROCEDURES FOR MOBULIDS

The primary aim of the following Minimum Standards for Safe Handling and Live Release Procedures is to ensure the highest level of survival of mobulids and that, whenever possible, prompt, and effective action will be taken to return the mobulid 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 mobulid.

Safety first: *These minimum standards should be considered in light of safety and practicability for crew. Crew safety should always come first. 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.*

GENERAL PRINCIPLES APPLYING TO ALL GEARS

- Mobulid rays shall be released as soon as possible. Reducing the release time is the principal factor in determining survival of the released individual – survival is drastically reduced after more than 3 minutes of handling
- Prohibit the use of gaffes, hooks, or ropes to move or lift mobulid rays.
- Prohibit lifting, dragging, carrying or holding mobulid rays by the horns ("cephalic lobes"), tail, gill slits, mouth, wing, eye or spiracle (opening behind the eye) even by hand. Prohibit dragging by the wings but lifting by the wings is allowed when no other option is available.
- Prohibit the punching of holes through the bodies of mobulid rays (e.g. to pass a cable through for lifting the mobulid ray).
- Minimise direct contact with the skin of mobulid rays to prevent damage to their protective mucus layer and epidermis; handling should be avoided where possible and, if necessary, conducted with wet, non-abrasive materials.

BEST PRACTICES FOR LIVE RELEASE FROM PURSE SEINERS

- If brought onboard, do not allow the ray to go through the loading chute to the lower deck.

- **Small and medium sized rays** shall be released using stretchers to facilitate release in cases when a stretcher is not available, manual release should include:
 - 2 or 3 crew who carry the animal belly-down. The ray should be held far away from the tail to avoid contact with the barb (one mobulid species has a barb near the base of its tail).
 - Do not lift the animal by the tail
 - Do not drag, carry or hold an animal by its cephalic lobes (“horns”) or in its gill slits.
 - Do not expose the ray for long to air or sun.
 - Do not insert your hands in the mouth or gill slits to carry

- **Large and medium sized rays** shall be, to the extent possible, directly released from the net using the brailer or directly from the brailer (see methods recommended in document [IOTC-2012-WPEB08-INF07](#)).

- If a release from the brailer or the net is not possible, it is recommended to either:
 - Release using a purpose-made mobulid sorting grid with a rigid frame that allows the animal to lie flat during release (see document [IOTC-2025-WPEB21\(AS\)-INF08](#) for construction instructions). The grid can be placed over the unloading hatch or on the hopper. A crane can be used to lift the grid and release the mobulid over the side of the vessel. Instructions for fabricating the grid can be found later in this document.
 - release using a cargo net, a canvas sling, or a similar device lifted with the crane. Try not to allow the animal’s wings to bend significantly.
 - A seawater hose placed in the animal’s mouth is helpful to keep water running over its gills.

- Each vessel must have the following release equipment accessible on deck at all times:
 - Mobulid sorting grid
 - Stretcher
 - Cargo net, canvas sling, or any similar device that can be attached to the crane

BEST PRACTICES FOR LIVE-RELEASE FOR GILLNETTERS

- Mobulids should not intentionally be hauled aboard. Before the net is hauled onboard, maintain the animal in the water and use the body of the net to bring the ray alongside the side of the vessel, disentangle it by manoeuvring the net or using tools e.g. a long-handled line cutter and, if necessary, cut the net. Care should be taken to minimise stress and/or injury to the ray
- For entangled animals, secure excess tangled area in the net with the long-handled gaff while other crew members remove the ray from the entangled areas of the net. The net cutter should be used to remove the animal from the tangled area of the net. Do not use the gaff on the animal.
- Do not let the mobulid pass through or above the net/line hauler, rather heave the net/line from the 'tuna door'/net hauling 'door' or haul by lifting through the gunwale.
- If it is not possible to disentangle the ray while keeping it in the water (such as in larger vessels where deck height doesn't allow it), carefully bring the ray on board, while ensuring that the ray may not pass above or through the net hauler and making every attempt to support the ray's weight by at least two points (i.e., one point of contact being the midsection, the other being the bottom end of the body near the tail), or preferably have 2 or 3 people carry the ray by the sides of each wing. If feasible, use a crane/cargo net/grid/stretchers...
- Disentangle the ray from the net—if the ray is 'badly' entangled, you may have to section some parts of the net (care should be taken to prevent injury to the animal while doing so). Try to minimise handling time and release it as soon as possible.
- A seawater hose placed in the animal's mouth is helpful to keep water running over its gills.

BEST PRACTICES FOR LIVE-RELEASE FROM LONGLINES/ HOOK AND LINE

- If possible stop the vessel to safely remove gear and release large rays.
- Bring the ray alongside the vessel, if possible. Always leave the animal in the water.
- If the animal is not entangled and can be brought close to the boat, consider attaching a flyback prevention device to the branch line to reduce the risk of a lead (or hook) flyback accident.
- For animals that are hooked or have swallowed the hook, use a long-handled line cutter to cut the line as close to the hook as possible leaving as little trailing line as possible.

- For entangled animals, secure excess tangled line with the long-handled gaff while another crew member uses a long-handled line cutter to remove as much tangled line as possible. Do not use the gaff on the animal.

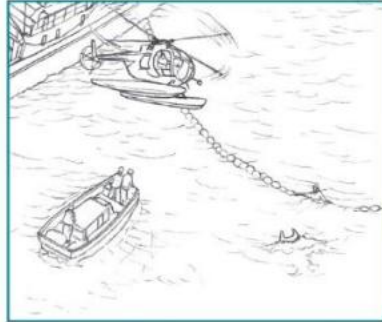
ANNEX I – ILLUSTRATIONS⁶

Purse seine

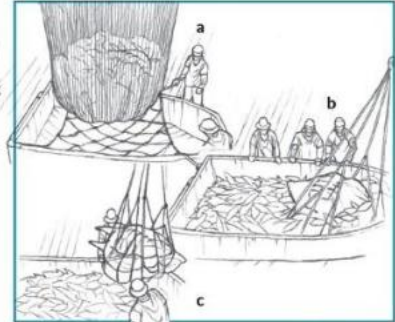
****If mobulid rays are detected from the helicopter or by crew this should be reported to the captain so they can avoid encirclement and inform the crew to have a purpose built cradle/stretcher or netting available and ready, to return the animals to the sea as rapidly as possible.****

- 1** Ideally rays should be released while they are still free-swimming (e.g. back down procedure, submerging corks, cutting net).

If captured, do not allow the ray to go through the loading chute to the lower deck. The ray should be released immediately from the upper deck.



- 2** Rays that are too large to be lifted safely by hand should be brailled out of the net and released using a purpose built large-mesh cargo net or canvas sling or similar device



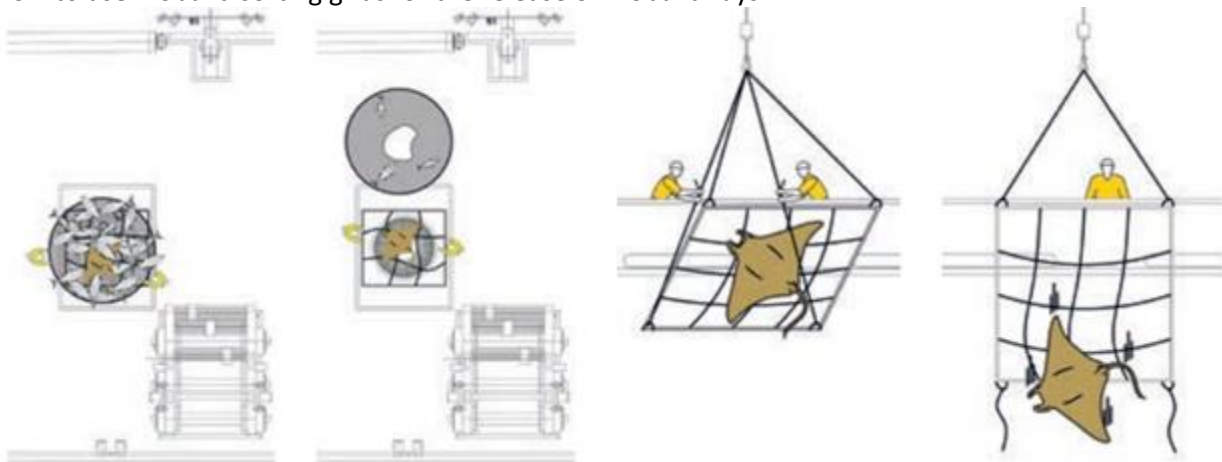
- 3** Small (< 30kg) and medium rays (30–60 kg) should be handled by 2 or 3 people and carried by the sides of its wings or preferably using a purpose-built cradle/stretcher while ensuring the safety of the crew.



- 4** When entangled in netting, carefully cut the net away from the animal and release to the sea as quickly as possible while ensuring the safety of the crew.

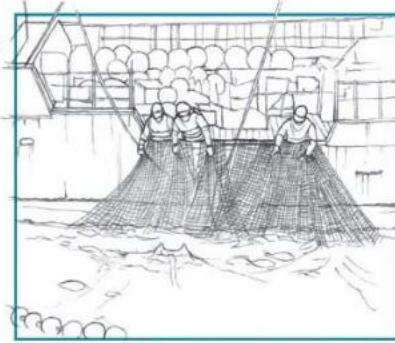


How to use mobulid sorting grids for the release of mobulid rays

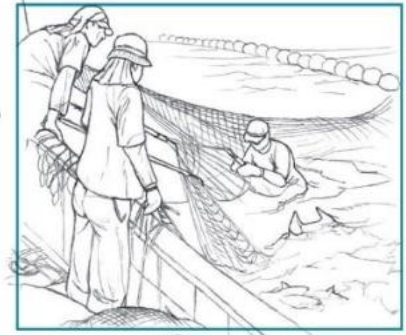


Gillnets

- 1 Avoid bringing the ray on deck and try to maintain the animal by the side of the boat in the water. Try to disentangle the ray using i.e. a longhandled line cutter.



- 2 Use the body of the net to manoeuvre the ray alongside the boat; care should be taken to minimise stress and/or injury to the ray.



- 3 If it is not possible to disentangle the ray while keeping it in the water, carefully bring the ray on board, making every attempt to support the ray's weight by at least two points (i.e., one point of contact being the midsection, the other being the bottom end of the body near the tail), or preferably have 2 or 3 people carry the ray by the sides of each wing; use crane/cargo net/grid if it's as large ray).

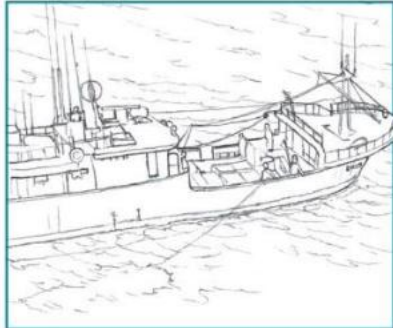


- 4 Disentangle the ray from the net - you may have to section some parts of the net if the ray is 'badly' entangled (care should be taken to prevent injury to the animal while doing so).
Try to minimise handling time and release ASAP, if possible, get someone to pour water over the animal while you are handling it.

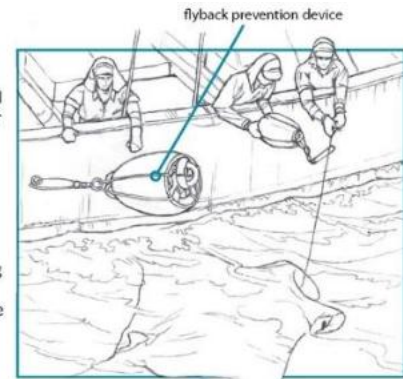


Longline and hook and line

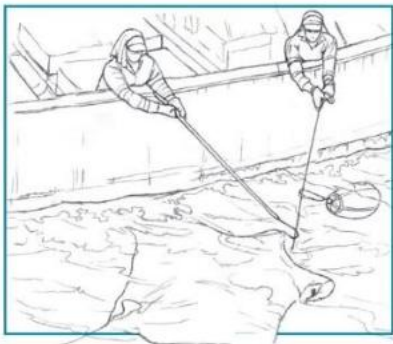
- 1 Always stop the vessel to safely remove gear and release large rays.



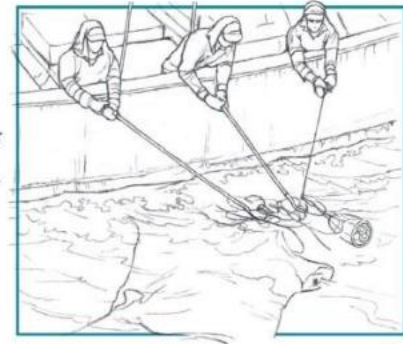
- 2 Bring the ray alongside the vessel, if possible. Always leave the animal submerged in the water so that its chance of post-release survival will be much higher.
If the animal is not entangled and can be brought close to the boat, consider attaching a flyback prevention device to the branchline to reduce the risk of a lead (or hook) flyback accident.



- 3 For animals that are hooked or have swallowed the hook please use a long-handled line cutter, to cut the line as close to the hook as possible.



- 4 For animals that are entangled, secure any excess tangled line with the long-handled gaff, while another crew member uses a long-handled line cutter to remove as much tangled line as possible. Do not use the gaff on the animal.



What not to do – all gears

1 Do not leave a ray on deck until hauling is finished before returning it to the sea (release ASAP).



2 Do not gaff, drag, carry, lift or pull a ray by its 'cephalic lobes' or tail

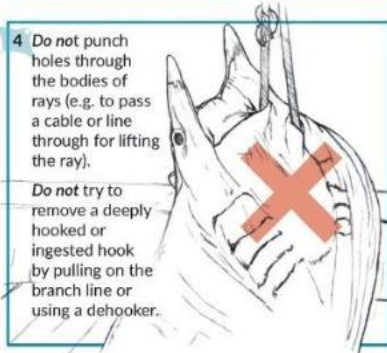


3 Do not insert hooks, gaffs or hands into the gill slits or the spiracles. Do not damage the ray's eyes.

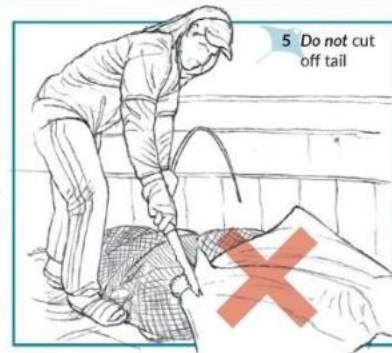


4 Do not punch holes through the bodies of rays (e.g. to pass a cable or line through for lifting the ray).

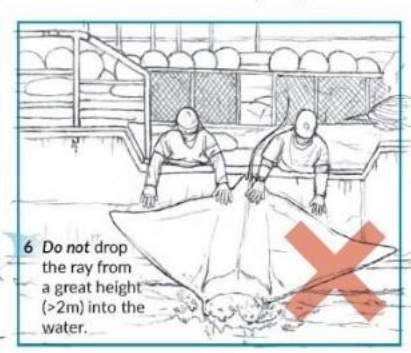
Do not try to remove a deeply hooked or ingested hook by pulling on the branch line or using a dehooker.



5 Do not cut off tail



6 Do not drop the ray from a great height (>2m) into the water.



CETACEANS

Note: The following guidelines were adopted during WPEB and endorsed by SC in 2024

GUIDELINES FOR SAFELY HANDLING AND RELEASING SMALL CETACEANS FROM A LONGLINE OR DROP LINE

Equipment list: Knives and pliers, Specialised cutters and poles.

1. In a longline or dropline vessel, the crew may be able to detect a bycaught small cetacean visually from up to 1 nautical mile away if bycaught during the day. Those bycaught at night are likely to be seen only when very close to the vessel or may be evident in the nature of the pull on the line and the direction it comes from, plus the exhalation sounds as the animal surfaces and breathes.
2. Once detected, the vessel should be moved towards the bycaught animal, rather than attempting to bring the animal towards the vessel by further hauling the gear.
3. Continued hauling may further embed the hook in the animal, which may further injure the lodgement site (which could be the lip, throat, or stomach).
4. The management of a small cetacean bycaught on a longline or dropline hook will depend on the size and configuration of the vessel, the height of the deck from the waterline, and the size and behaviour of the bycaught species.
5. Wherever possible, a bycaught small cetacean should be safely and humanely released in the water, before the fishing gear is brought aboard.
6. Crew members attempting to release an animal should never enter the water to avoid putting themselves at an unnecessarily high risk of injury and death (they could also become caught in the gear, be exposed to cold temperatures or get physically injured by the struggling bycaught animal).

Do's:

- Immediately inform the skipper when a bycaught small cetacean is detected.
- When detected, hauling of the line should cease immediately, it could cause more injury and stress to the animal.
- Make all attempts to manoeuvre the vessel towards the animal, preventing vessel roll by keeping the bow into the swell.
- Cut the line using an appropriate implement, as close as possible to the animal. If needed use a blade on an extended pole to reach the line and cut it.

- Only under exceptional circumstances should any attempt be made to remove the hook.

Don'ts:

- Do not continue to haul or pull on the line.
- Do not use any kind of hook to bring the animal closer, as this will further injure it.

Safety Note: DO NOT enter the water with the animal, as this will put crew members at unnecessary risk.

Guidelines for safely handling and releasing small cetaceans from purse-seine nets

Equipment list: Cranes or boom winches, Binoculars, Radio.

1. In a purse-seiner, encircled small cetaceans are usually detected soon after the net has been pursed, early in the fishing operation. Typically, encircled animals initially swim back and forth inside the cork line, at the surface and at the furthest point from the vessel. When encircled, they almost never use their ability to jump over the water to escape, most likely due to their instinct to group together when under threat.
2. Efforts should be prioritised to remove the animals from the net as soon as possible. If delays occur, then the risk of stress-related 'passive behaviour' developing will increase, which is known to lead to death soon after.
3. Three methods are known to be in use that create an escape route for encircled small cetaceans:
 - a. Backdown. The vessel goes astern, so the corkline becomes elliptical and the most forward end is pulled below the surface, thus facilitating escape.
 - b. Dolphin gate. A prefabricated quick release rope detaches the corkline from the seine net, which sinks and creates an opening for escape.
 - c. Skiff pulling on a rope to cause a slack area in the cork line, which is then held down using a removable weight.

For all three methods, the placement of the skiff needs to be carefully considered, so its presence (i.e. the noise caused by the motor and the bubbles caused by propeller wash) does not deter the encircled dolphins from approaching the escape route.

4. It may also be useful to use the skiff to shepherd the animals towards the opening, although it should be moved slowly and carefully to avoid further stress and strike injuries.
5. Wherever possible, a bycaught small cetacean should be safely and humanely released in the water, before the fishing gear is brought aboard.

Do's:

- Crew members, using high points such as the wheelhouse roof or a crow's nest, should be on the lookout for encircled small cetaceans during pursing operations (early in the fishing event).
- Removal operations should commence as soon as encircled animals are detected, to avoid 'passive' behaviour from developing, which is an indicator of imminent stress-related death.
- One of three release methods should be used (depending on their suitability to the vessel), utilising a combination of changed fishing practice and modified net (see above).
- The skiff should be used to maintain the shape of the net (and prevent net folds from forming) and to shepherd encircled animals towards the exit point, although slow and careful manoeuvring is required to avoid further stress and injury to the animals and to ensure the safety of the operator.
- During release, crew members should keep watch to ensure:
 - i. the seine net remains open and net folds do not form,
 - ii. all animals observed encircled are accounted for during the release operation, and
 - iii. skiff operations remain safe for the operator and for the encircled animals.

GUIDELINES FOR SAFELY HANDLING AND RELEASING SMALL CETACEANS FROM GILLNETS

Equipment list: Knives and pliers, Specialised cutters (e.g. goose-beak cutter) and poles, Ropes.

1. In a gillnet, a small cetacean tangled is unlikely to be detected until hauling and until it is close to the vessel.
2. If the animal is detected alive in a demersal net, it likely only became bycaught during the haul; while if detected alive in a pelagic net, the animal may have been tangled for some time and was able to continue breathing at the surface.

3. When an animal is detected bycaught, hauling should be slowed to a minimum or cease and procedures should commence as soon as possible to facilitate its release.
4. Wherever possible, a bycaught small cetacean should be safely and humanely released in the water, before the fishing gear is brought aboard.
5. Crew members attempting to release an animal should never enter the water to avoid putting themselves at an unnecessarily high risk of injury and death (they could also become caught in the gear, be exposed to cold temperatures or get physically injured by the struggling bycaught animal).

Do's:

- The crew member closest to the net roller, or in a position where the net can be seen ahead of the net roller (before it comes aboard), should be on the lookout for small cetaceans tangled in the gillnet during the haul.
- If one is detected, the skipper should be informed and release procedures should commence immediately.
- The portion of net in which the animal is bycaught should be brought alongside, by carefully manoeuvring the vessel.
- Securing ropes should be placed around the net, one in front of and one behind the animal, so it can be gently lifted just above the waterline, either using available cranes or winches, or by hand if the animal is sufficiently small and there are available tie off points.
- The net should be cut carefully along the axis of the animal, so it can then be rolled to facilitate its release and soft landing back into the water:
 - a. From a small vessel with a deck close to the waterline, a small cutting tool like a knife can be used,
 - b. From a larger vessel with a high deck, a specialised cutting implement on a long handle may be needed.
- If using the curved blade on an extension pole, take care not to injure the animal as the vessel is likely to roll in the swell.

Safety Note: DO NOT enter the water with the animal, as this will put crew members at unnecessary risk.

GUIDELINES FOR SAFELY HANDLING AND RELEASE OF SMALL CETACEANS BROUGHT ON BOARD

Equipment list: Deck hoses and buckets, Flat straps and ropes, Soft mats, Knives and pliers, Cloth bags, sheets and towels, Cranes or boom winches, Animal stretcher.

1. Whenever possible, cetaceans should be released from gear while still in the water, as bringing them on board will cause additional stress and potential injury.
2. If a bycaught small cetacean may be brought onboard a fishing vessel, either accidentally (if not detected beforehand) or intentionally (if deemed safer for the animal or crew), the following handling procedures should be followed for releasing the animal as soon as practicable, regardless of its condition, in a way that does not further compromise its welfare, nor the safety of the crew.
3. Collectively, the vessel crew should all be trained and competent in the handling and release of small cetaceans. One person onboard ('incident manager') will be responsible for (i) managing the incident (i.e. animal that is brought aboard) and delegating tasks (to other crewmembers), (ii) rapidly assessing and prioritising, (iii) physically stabilising the animal and providing first aid, (iv) all decisions around the handling and release of the animal, and (v) recording all relevant details about the incident.

How to safely bring the small cetacean (all dolphins and porpoises) aboard:

- a. When an animal is lifted from the water, its full weight will come to bear on the lifting apparatus, which is likely to be a portion of the net. All care should be taken to ensure the animal is not twisted or caught in a way that stretches or twists its flippers or tail, or bends its jaw, in an unnatural manner, thus causing further injury or stress. To achieve its most natural posture, it may be necessary to gently lift the animal just above the waterline, then lower into the water again (and repeat a few times) to ensure the animal comes to rest in the best possible position for the lift.
- b. While lifting the animal, if available on the vessel with a crane or winch, perform all movements as carefully as possible, ensuring the animal does not collide with objects. If entangled in a net, a rope should be attached to the net as close as possible to the animal, so that greater control over its movements through the air can be achieved. A third person, usually the skipper, first mate or deck boss, should coordinate the move, providing instructions to the crane operator and the rope handler.
- c. Decide beforehand where the animal will be placed, taking into account that a quiet and out-of-the-way place is preferable, on a temperature-neutral surface and away

from fumes. A soft mat and stabilising sandbags (or equivalent) should be in place, or on hand for use.

Make a basic assessment about its condition:

- d. The crew are not expected to provide more than basic first aid care to the bycaught animal:
 - determine the life state of the animal, to assess its health and the extent of obvious injuries,
 - keep the animal in a physically stable position,
 - cover with wet towels (although avoid covering the blowhole),
 - carefully and humanely remove net or embedded objects, stop bleeding by applying pressure over the wound site, and
 - make sure the blowhole and mouth are free from obstructions.

Hold it aboard for the shortest possible period:

- e. It is almost always better to release the bycaught animal sooner, rather than later, to avoid stress that is physiological (caused by increased physical demands on breathing, impaired blood circulation and temperature regulation, and abrading surfaces) and psychological (caused by being in an unfamiliar environment, where there is excessive noise, light and movement, and discomfort caused by heat or cold, or abrading surfaces) in nature. Nonetheless, it may be necessary to hold the animal on board if it is unsafe to release it.
- f. It is best to place the animal in a temperature-neutral environment, where the deck surface and the air temperature are not dissimilar from the water that the animal came from, or will go back into. Excessively hot and cold surfaces should be avoided. The structure of the vessel and the use of dry towels may be useful as a barrier against cold winds or wet towels against heat and direct sunlight (remembering to avoid placing towels over the blowhole). Soft mats can be used to prevent injury from sharp edges on the deck, although may also be useful in insulating the animal from temperature differences and vibration.
- g. Excessive noise in the vicinity and powerful lights directed at the animal should be avoided. Damaged hearing and/or sight will put the animal at risk when released, as it will reduce the effectiveness of foraging and of avoiding predators or other threats.
- h. Sandbags and wet rolled towels (or sheets or netting material) should be used to stabilise the animal in the upright position. Placing them immediately behind the pectoral fins, at the widest point, will be most effective. Additional wet rolled towels

can be used under the pectoral fin where it joints the body, to provide further support and to avoid joint injury if the vessel pitches or rolls.

How to move and release it back to the water:

- i. To move an animal, it will need to be placed on a stretcher (if available). Half roll up the stretcher along its long axis, once the pole on that side has been removed from the sleeve and placed in a safe location. With the assistance of others and under the instruction of the incident manager, partially and gently roll the animal away, so the half-rolled stretcher can be placed underneath. Move to the other side, then partially and gently roll the animal in the other direction, so the portion of rolled up stretcher can be unrolled. Replace the pole in the sleeve. Do not twist on or pull any of the appendages, as this may cause injury. Carefully assess, based on the species, if the dorsal fins should be tucked in and back before performing this task. If this is necessary, extra personnel will be needed to stabilise the animal.
- j. All crew members should follow the instructions of the incident manager, who will inform all involved how the animal will be lifted and where it will be lifted to. Although existing net or a tarpaulin can be used to make a makeshift stretcher, a purpose-built item will facilitate the most stable and safe lifts. Once the lift has been planned and is about to take place, the incident manager will inform the skipper and all affected crewmembers.

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR HANDLING SMALL CETACEANS (ALL DOLPHINS AND PORPOISES) WHILE ON BOARD:

Do's:

- Stay clear of the tail fluke and rostrum to avoid injury to crew.
- Use props, such as sandbags or rolled towels placed on either side of the animal, to gently hold it upright and in a 'natural' position.
- Make all efforts to keep the animal in an upright position at all times, including when moving, or when returning to the water.
- Whenever possible, use lifting 'stretchers', which are safer for the animals and the crew.
- For animals being held aboard the vessel for extended periods (e.g. for more than 10 minutes):
 - wet towels should be carefully placed over the animal to ensure they are kept moist, using water collected from overboard that is of ambient temperature. This

is particularly important to avoid hypo- or hyperthermia, and to prevent the particularly sensitive skin from windburn or sunburn;

- regularly and gently drizzle small amounts of ambient temperature water over the face and eyes, but not into or near the blowhole, to maintain eye hydration and overall condition;
- apply Vaseline around the exterior surface of the blowhole to maintain skin condition (using gloves), although this should be done carefully to ensure none comes into contact with the interior surfaces of the nasal passage.
- Although there is typically a lot of noise on or near fishing vessels, attempt to minimise noise as much as possible. The main engine may need to continue running for safety reasons, but if at all possible auxiliary engines should be shut down temporarily.
- Adopt an holistic approach to the care of a bycaught small cetacean at all times, especially when attempting to handle and release it, approaching the animal as if a small child or elderly person in need.
- Gentler, quieter and more thoughtful actions create a safer situation, for the small cetacean and for the crewmembers involved.
- If there is any doubt as to whether an animal is (freshly) dead or in an unresponsive state, it should be treated as live, with all the same care applied and the same motivation to handle the animal following these guidelines and to release it back into the water as soon as possible

Don'ts:

- Avoid pushing, pulling or twisting the animals' appendages including the rostrum, pectoral and dorsal fins and the fluke, as this may cause painful injuries that can decrease the chances of survival.
- Do not use the jaw of the animal to move or hold it, despite looking robust.
- Avoid placing your hands or feet inside the mouth as you can be easily injured.
- Do not cover or block the blowhole of the animal, or spray water in or near it, to allow uninterrupted breathing.
- Avoid using deck hoses if the water is partially heated as it travels through the pump in the engine room, so that temperature shock is prevented when the animal is released
- High pressure deck hoses should not be directed toward or near the eyes at any time.

- Avoid any kind of physical contact with the eyes of the animal, unless attempting to gently and carefully remove foreign bodies that are relatively superficial. Using water to ‘flood-irrigate’ the eyes is the best approach, although a clean cotton cloth may assist in removing small objects.
- Avoid placing the animal near sharp and abrasive objects, and on hot or cold surfaces.
- Avoid placing the animal downwind of exhaust fumes, where possible.
- The crew should avoid being downwind of the blowhole.
- Refrain from making sudden movements within view of a bycaught animal and from shining bright lights in their direction, as both may frighten the animal.
- Avoid dropping objects on the deck (as high intensity low pitch noises can be most damaging) and shouting if possible (oscillating noise is likely to cause confusion and added stress for the animal).

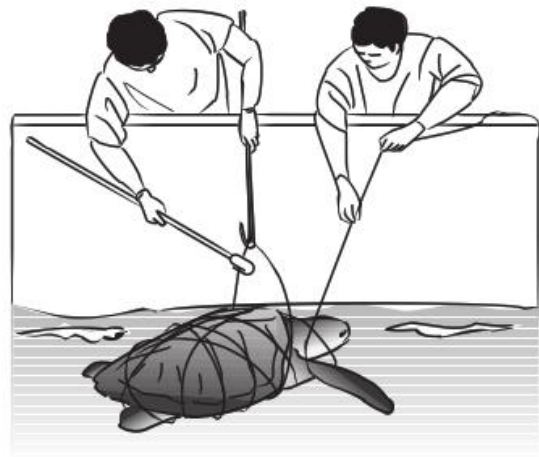
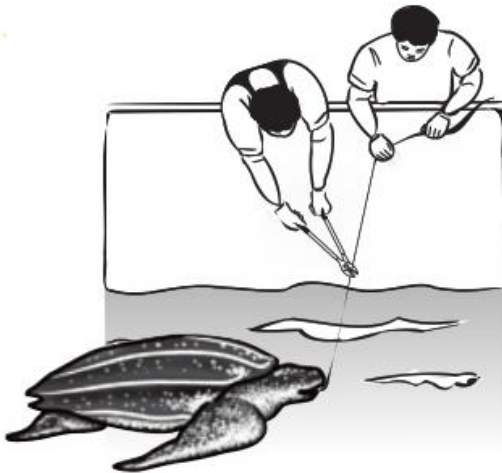
MARINE TURTLES

Note: These guidelines are taken from the species ID guide which is referred to in Resolution 12/04 – *suggest that these should be updated as they are now quite outdated.*

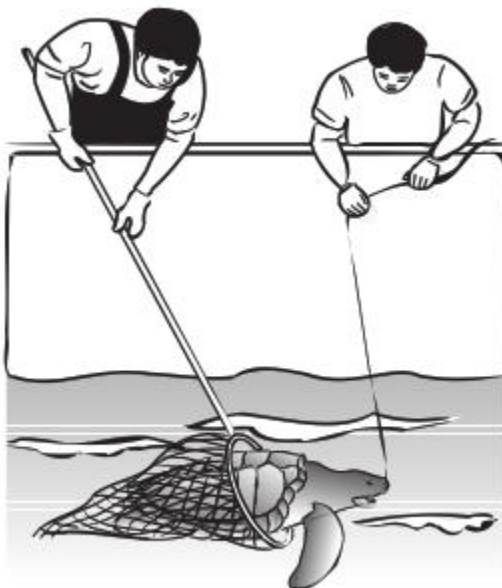
RELEASING HOOKED TURTLES GUIDELINES

If a turtle is caught, the following steps should be taken to give it the best possible chance of survival:

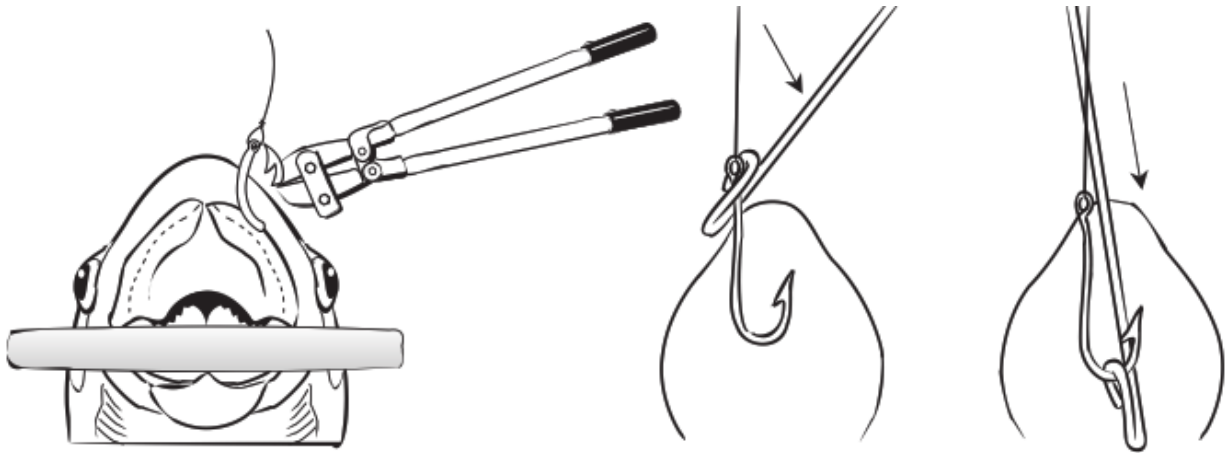
- A.** Assess the turtle's size, if large, release it or entangle it using cutter and gaff to cut tangled lines.



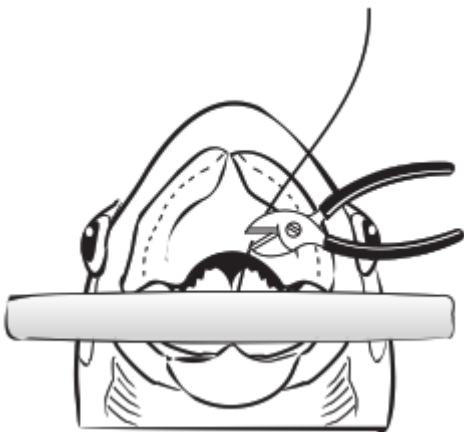
If small, bring it on board with dip net



B. Place a piece of wood in the turtle's mouth so it cannot bite, **if hook is visible**, cut off barb and remove hook, **or** use a de-hooker to remove hook.

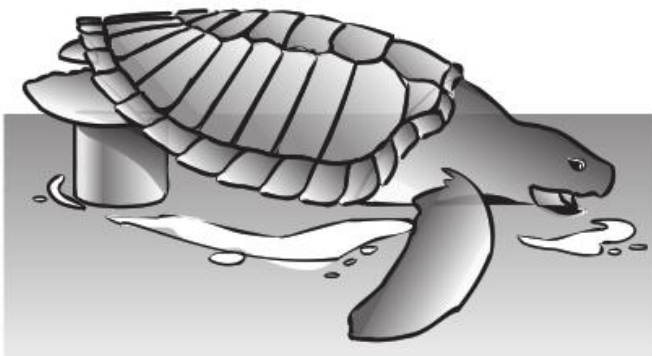


If hook is not visible cut line close to mouth.

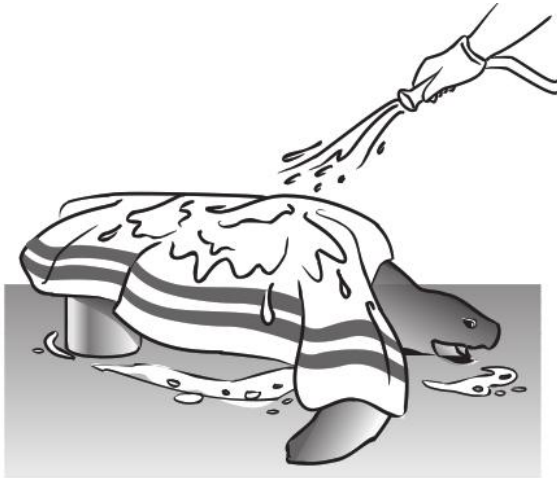


C. Assess the condition of the turtle before releasing it: depending on how lively it is, keep it on board for a minimum of 4 hours, and up to 24 hours.

Raise rear flippers 20cm off deck to drain water from lungs.



Place turtle in shaded location covered with wet towels.



D. Identify the turtle's species name then carefully return it to the water



E. Record the interaction on your logbook and inform your fisheries department



OTHER GUIDELINES TO CONSIDER

Other guidelines that have been presented to WPEB

Gillnets – all taxa (including seabirds):

https://iotc.org/sites/default/files/documents/2021/08/IOTC-2021-WPEB17AS-23_Draft_safe_handling_guidelines.pdf

Purse seiners (Orthongel, 2012):

https://www.orthongel.fr/docs/publications/GoodpracticesGuide_LDef.pdf

Updates on above: https://iotc.org/sites/default/files/documents/2022/08/IOTC-2022-WPEB18-23_-_best_practices_PS.pdf

Purse seiners (AZTI, 2025):

https://iotc.org/sites/default/files/documents/2025/08/IOTC_2025_WPEB21_AS_35_-_PS_best_practices.pdf

All gears, sharks only (IATTC, 2024):

https://iotc.org/sites/default/files/documents/2024/08/IOTC-2024-WPEB20AS-INF03_-_IATTC_handling_release_guidelines.pdf

Other available guidelines:

IATTC Seabirds: https://iattc.org/GetAttachment/50881315-0d41-413f-b269-4fbcc7ad253c/WGEB-03-06_Seabird-Best-Handling-and-Release-Practice-Guidelines.pdf

IATTC turtles: [https://iattc.org/GetAttachment/b5e1aaca-6eb3-49bb-8f3b-a848d4852243/WGEB-03-05_Best-handling-and-release-practice-guidelines-\(BHRP\)-for-sea-turtles.pdf](https://iattc.org/GetAttachment/b5e1aaca-6eb3-49bb-8f3b-a848d4852243/WGEB-03-05_Best-handling-and-release-practice-guidelines-(BHRP)-for-sea-turtles.pdf)