



Angler Ethics

It is said that ethics are what we do when no one is looking. Ethics are what our individual conscience allows – a code of conduct if you will – especially important with regards to a pastime if that pastime is to endure.

The pastime I am talking about here is fishing, and like all great pursuits, fishing is not without standards. Let's take a moment to review fishing ethics. Most are common sense, but a few may be new to some readers. I apologize to folks who live on the moral side of the street. This is mostly directed to those (hopefully the overwhelming minority) among us who live on the dark side, operating with reckless disregard toward our natural resources.

Let's start with the bottom of the barrel (no pun intended). We've all seen it, whether on a walk to a favorite stretch of river or stream, launching a boat on a lake, or even just driving down the road – LITTER. Litter is a despicable eyesore that speaks volumes about the individual who produces it. I'm not talking about tossing out an occasional apple core; I'm talking about discarding things that will be around long after we're gone. My job as Coordinator of the MassWildlife Angler Education Program allows me to spend time in some of the nicest aquatic environments in the state, and no matter where I go the eyesore is present. An ethical angler never litters, and in many cases, will pick up after the slob who did. So for those of you who are guilty of littering - please, for the love of nature and for your own self respect, stop this deplorable, lazy practice.

The absolute worst trash for anglers to discard is fishing line; it is a danger to almost every critter around. Birds in particular snatch up discarded line for nesting material, making hatchlings and adult birds vulnerable to fatal tangles. Along with discarded fishing line, bait containers, hooks, broken bobbers, and lures left on shore are signs that state emphatically, "Anglers are slobs." It is also bad practice to discard fish out of the water that you feel are nuisance or "trash" species. There is a balance within each water body; your aversion toward a given species of fish doesn't give you license to litter the shoreline with them. The carelessness of a few fishermen leads many people to characterize all anglers as irresponsible, which is a dangerous thing if we care about our pastime. Enough said here, we all know the right thing to do, and if you're not doing it, you are a lazy slob.

It is important to respect private land. If you are unsure of whether a pond or section of stream is on public land, find out before you go tromping in. If an area you'd like to fish is on private land, always ask permission, even if the property is not posted. Public access to the water is a contentious issue for many anglers. We all have the power to improve relations with private land owners, which can go a long way towards better access. So, get permission, tread lightly, and leave no trace on both private and public land.

If you fish here in Massachusetts, you must possess a fishing license if you're 15 or older. A license for those ages 15 to 17 is free, but once you turn 18, you join the paying ranks. The money generated when you purchase a fishing license goes to MassWildlife to fund management of rivers and streams, fish stocking, and educational programs. You can feel good knowing that your license fee is directly applied to making fishing



more enjoyable and accessible. A fishing license is valid from the date of purchase until the last day of the calendar year; don't forget a new one is needed each year.

Ethical anglers educate themselves about the regulations and rules set forth in this publication – the Guide to Hunting, Freshwater Fishing, and Trapping – which I'll refer to as the Guide. In Massachusetts, freshwater fishing rules are fairly simple. The most common violations result when anglers, either because of greed or ignorance, take too many fish or fish that are undersized. These inconsiderate individuals do not take the time to read the rules – or even worse – believe it's their right to take limitless fish of any kind. Anglers who are caught give a variety of excuses for their actions, but there is no justification. An ethical angler stays up to date and knows all the rules. It is good practice to review the fishing section of the Guide every year. (See pages 16-23)

There are only two reasons to keep game fish: for eating and mounting as a trophy. Most anglers know this, but it's worth repeating. With that in mind, the law is clear – you cannot transport live game fish without a permit. All game fish leaving any water body in Massachusetts must be dead, no excuses. This law is in place to stop the practice of moving fish, which can spread disease or disrupt the delicate balance of a given ecosystem. One extreme example of what can result from moving fish is the onslaught of invasive Asian Carp in the Mississippi and Illinois River drainages.

Baitfish collection is another issue. There are rules in place, including several new restrictions this year (see page 17), which dictate the types of fish that can lawfully be used as bait. These are the only fish you can move, but only for use as bait. It is not legal to dump leftover bait into any water body. When you have leftover baitfish, save them for another trip; but if not practical, it is best to euthanize them. And for all you ice anglers – dumping unused baitfish into your holes after a day on the ice is illegal.

After hearing that circle hooks decreased fish mortality, I decided to give them a try. Both the catch rate and the lip hook rate increased enough to convince me to switch to all circle hooks for the Angler Education Program. These hooks gained popularity in saltwater angling years ago and are now starting to make believers of us freshwater folks. I highly recommend them, especially to newer anglers who haven't yet mastered the art of setting a hook. With circle hooks you need only let the fish take the line then slowly start reeling; the hook does the rest. Circle hooks almost always catch the fish in the lip area (the outermost part of the upper or lower jaw), which is better for anglers and much better for the fish. Veteran anglers might initially have trouble getting used to allowing the fish to swim and not using the standard hook-setting technique. But once you get the feel for it, the rest is easy. I even use circle hooks on my ice fishing tip ups. If you just can't get over the thrill of setting a hook, try barbless hooks. All of this, of course, is based on the premise that you will not be keeping your catch. If you are keeping

fish, by all means use whatever hook you're most comfortable with.

Catch-and-release anglers should be attentive while fishing; falling asleep with your bait in the water only leads to deeply-hooked fish. Consider using barbless hooks, and if using lures, switch to single hooks instead of trebles. When fighting a fish, it's best to reel the fish in reasonably quickly and return it to the water promptly to avoid undue stress and exhaustion. This practice helps fish recover faster. Deeply-hooked fish (hooks down into the esophagus area or opening to the stomach) are another matter. With the assumption that thin-wired hooks would rust out, it was once common practice to just cut the line. There is no proof that this was ever true, and since modern hooks are thicker and more durable they are not likely to rust out. Delayed mortality studies suggest that it is best to attempt to remove the hook if doing so will not cause further damage to the gills. An inexpensive hook disgorger works better than needle-nose pliers or forceps. It's been my experience with gill-hooked fish that it's best to leave the hook and cut the line, particularly if blood is running out from the operculum (gill cover). Poking around trying to remove the hook in these situations will likely make matters worse.

Fishing from a watercraft of any kind has its own set of ethics and etiquette. For starters, you should know how to operate your craft safely before you hit the water. Consider taking a boating safety course. These classes offer very useful information for all boaters – whether using a \$25,000 bass boat or a \$300 kayak. A few tips worth mentioning are as follows. Proper launching and loading is critical, especially at a popular lake or pond. Have everything ready to go before you launch; don't make other boaters in line wait while you load fishing gear from your vehicle. Consider practicing the most efficient method of loading your boat, perhaps at a quiet ramp, until you feel confident. While on the water, don't cut off shore anglers or other boaters. Avoid casting lures across docks or into other boats, and don't race across the lake to be the first to a spot. These behaviors give anglers a bad reputation.

Your actions make a difference. Think about what you are doing and how you will be perceived by the next generation of anglers and by the non-fishing public. One last thing we can all do is keep the other guy honest. If you see someone breaking the law or acting in a manner that denigrates our natural resources, report them. Don't start a confrontation; discreetly gather any information you can and call the Environmental Police at 800-632-8075. Take a moment to evaluate your own angling ethics, review the regulations in the Guide, and get out there on the water with family and friends!

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