

Avoiding Musky Angling Mortality

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I recently wrote an article about a Muskie that was documented to be caught 4 times on Potato Lake. Fish with tag #921. It was almost certainly caught and released even more than recorded. This article will discuss how to avoid Muskie mortality caused by angling, so they can be caught time and time again.

First, the most important and obvious factor to ensuring successful Muskie handling, is practicing catch and release. The legal size for a Potato Muskie to be kept is 40 inches. But there is really no good reason to keep a fish this big. Any Muskie reaching this big, is around 10 years old, and could live another 10 years! If you want a trophy to hang on your wall, you can have a plastic replica constructed. Let it go to allow it to enjoy it's life or let someone else catch it at a later date. Thankfully, almost all Muskies nowadays are released. Since the mid 1980's, people have understood the value of catch and release. Because of this, our muskies have increased in numbers and size.

The second way to avoid Muskie mortality is to properly net the fish and remove the hooks. I once watched two "sportsmen" catch a fish on a hot summer day. After at least 10 minutes of having the fish out of the water, passing it back and forth three times to take pictures, I watched them just flip the fish up into the air and splash into the water and boat off. The fish immediately went belly up. I boated out to the fish and was able to revive it after 15 minutes of keeping it upright. The hotter the water, the harder it is for the fish to survive.

There is an art to a proper Muskie release. First, after netting the fish, try to keep the fish in the water to remove the hooks. It is usually not necessary to throw the Muskie in the bottom of the boat. This is especially true on hot days.

Second, proper release gear is a must. Gear should include a heavy long pliers and a cutter able to cut any hooks that would cause harm to a fish if simply pulled out. A fish lip grabber is also very handy, but they should not be used to pull the fish up for pictures.

Third, try to keep the fish out of the water no longer than you can hold your breath. (What is fair is fair!). And last, after returning the fish to the water, you need to revive it by holding it just above the tail until it gains strength. This can take from 10 seconds to 20 minutes. It is not necessary to pull the fish back and forth to get water into the gills. Studies show it is best to just let the fish float in the water upright, until you feel it regain power. There are very few thrills better than feeling a Muskie regain its strength, and blasting off, splashing you in the face!

One last thing I like to have with me is band aids! Your fingers have a way of getting cut. My second worst required 7 stitches. The worst should have had stitches, but the fish were biting too good to take the time out.

If you take a picture, make sure you support the fish in the middle, and don't just hang it up and down. Studies have shown that it is best to provide support in the fish's mid- section to prevent spine and other injuries. Plus, when that prize 42 incher makes the inevitable shake to free itself from its captor, damage can be done to the gill plate and bone structure as the fish thrashes without proper body support.

In my opinion, most musky fishing deaths occur by people using live bait and letting the fish swallow the bait and hook. One study of 12 gut hooked muskies that were released, showed 100 percent mortality. One radio tagged fish took over a year to die, but it died.

I once watched three people in a pontoon catch and release two Muskies. They let the bobber stay under for at least 15 minutes, almost guaranteeing the hooks to be in the fish's throat. There is no good way to remove a hook from a fish's throat. It used to be believed that these hooks in the throat dissolved, so it was OK to just cut the line and let it go. That is not true. A fish released with a hook in the gut is a dead fish swimming. Death to this fish is inevitable. We all need to realize, that this is no longer an acceptable practice, if we want our fish to survive.

There are alternatives to gut hooking fish. But, I like to emphasize, by letting them swallow the bait with a single or treble hook, the fish will die. First, quick set rigs work. As the name implies, the hook is set soon after the fish hit's the bait, but before it get a chance to swallow the hooks. Usually used in the fall with very large suckers, this method results in very little musky mortality. The hook is set soon after the fish bites the bait. **Wisconsin law requires the use of quick set rigs on 8" and bigger live baits.**

Circle hooks are another way to fish live bait to reduce Muskie mortality. This new development in hook design prevents most throat hooked fish. The circle in the hook catches the fish in the jaw even if the fish swallows the bait deep in its gut. The hook is not set in a normal manner. When the fish runs, simply put pressure on it and the hook slides up to the jaw where it is hooked with its unique design. The fish can then be released without harm. This circle hook method could also be used when fishing for northern with smaller live bait in the summer.

I have a friend who recently has caught over 40 muskies using a circle hook. He uses small bait 5-6" long. All were hooked in the jaw. If you see someone fishing for northern or muskies with a regular single or treble hook, you might want to suggest considering this method, to prevent these caught and released fish from dying.

The DNR recently reduced the number of Muskie fingerlings that are stocked in Potato Lake. Perhaps we can offset this with proper Muskie releases. Good luck. I hope you catch (and release) the big one this year.

Hopefully I will see you at the fall meeting when we can further discuss this topic.