

Venting Reef Fish

A technique to conserve fish and reduce frustration

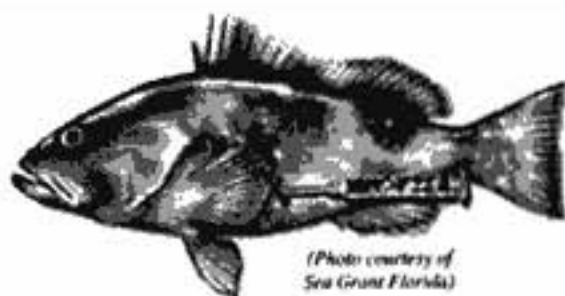
by Justin Sapp

It is rare to find an offshore fisherman that is not annoyed at the site of an undersize reef fish floating helplessly on top of the water after it was released.

The whole purpose of setting size limits is to ensure that enough of the fish survive to the age where they can spawn and maintain a stable fish population. It is not so some toothy predator or scavenging

bird can make an easy meal of young snapper or grouper.

The folks at Florida Sea Grant, working in partnership with Mote Marine, a research organization in Sarasota, have developed a simple system that could help save our undersized catch and also ease the conscience of many frustrated anglers. (Continued below)



(Photo courtesy of Sea Grant Florida)

Many reef fish have a gas-filled organ called a swim bladder, which controls buoyancy in the water column. You may have noticed that some fish caught at depth have bulging eyes with their stomach coming out of their mouth. Basically, when a reef fish like a grouper or a snapper is brought up, its swim bladder does not have time to adjust to the decreasing water pressure, and the expanding gases push out their innards. The fish can't release these gases and becomes stuck near the surface.

According to Karen Burns, a fish biologist at Mote Marine, this typically occurs in depths over 100 feet, but if retrieved quickly, some fish can suffer from bloating in 70 and 80 feet of water.

A simple procedure for helping these bloated fish get back to the bottom involves venting the air from the body before release. This can be accomplished by using a fish venting tool, a hollow puncturing device like a syringe. Proper venting helps the gas escape, allows the fish to descend, and improves survival.

It is best to vent the fish as quickly as possible with a minimum of handling. Hold the fish gently but firmly on its

side and insert the venting tool at a 45-degree angle approximately one to two inches back from the base of the pectoral fin, located on the fish's side behind the head.

Gently insert the tool deep enough to release the gases. You should be able to hear the sound of escaping gas. If a fish is extremely bloated, use your hand to gently push out the gases. If the stomach is sticking out of the fish's mouth, do not puncture it, as this can kill the fish.

If necessary, revive the fish by moving it back and forth to pass water over the gills until the fish is able to swim away freely.

Shawn Dick, president of Aquatic Release Conservation, has contracted with Florida Sea Grant to distribute venting tools at a small fee. Contact him at 1-877-411-4ARC (4272) or visit them on the web at www.dehooker4arc.com.

Shawn says the demand for these tools has been much greater as more fishermen are learning about the technique.

"If it saves one fish, and that fish spawns, then it is well worth the little bit of extra effort."

For detailed information, visit the Taylor County Extension website at <http://taylor.ifas.ufl.edu> or stop by the Taylor County Extension office to pick up a free venting tool.

Justin Sapp is the Marine & Natural Resource Extension Agent in Taylor County.