

Methods for longline fishers to safely handle and release unwanted sharks and rays

When releasing a shark or ray, follow these steps to reduce stress and injury and minimize your safety risk. The abundance of many shark and ray species have been declining – let's do our part to reverse this trend.

Minimize time spent handling and releasing sharks and rays. Some species and sizes of sharks and rays die if they experience too much stress when being caught and handled. Have a lifting device, bolt cutters, dehooker and line-cutter readily available on deck where crew can get it quickly.



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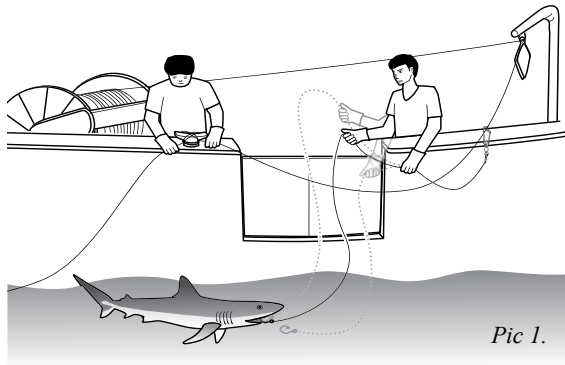


Safety First

Sharks can bite, stingrays can stab you with their venomous stinger, larger sharks and rays can strike you. Sharks can spin around and bite you even when you hold them by the tail. Even if they appear dead, keep away from sharks' jaws and stingrays' tails.

1. Bringing the shark or ray to the vessel

- Stop the vessel.
- Secure the far side of the mainline to the boat. This keeps any remaining gear in the water from pulling on the line and the animal.
- If the fish is hooked but not entangled, and you can see the hook in the body, try lightly flicking the branchline to dislodge the hook (Picture 1).

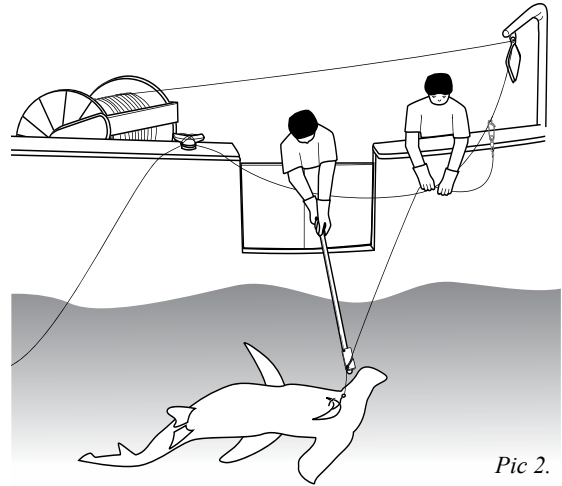


- Bring the shark or ray as close to the vessel as possible without putting too much tension on the branchline – especially if the fish is hooked. If a taught branchline breaks or the shark throws the hook, weights and other gear can shoot toward the vessel at high speed.

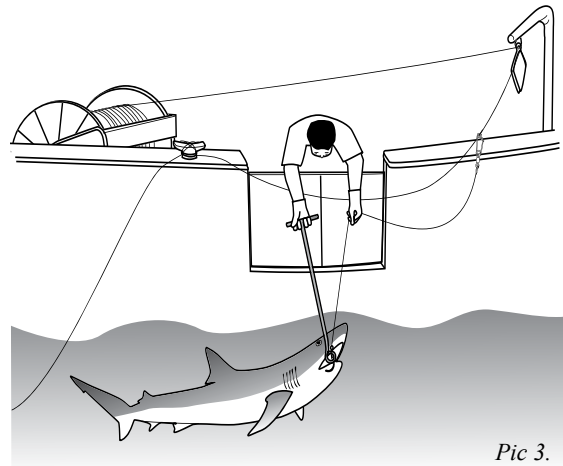
2. Removing hook and line from sharks and rays in the water

For sharks and rays too large or dangerous to bring on deck, including all stingrays:

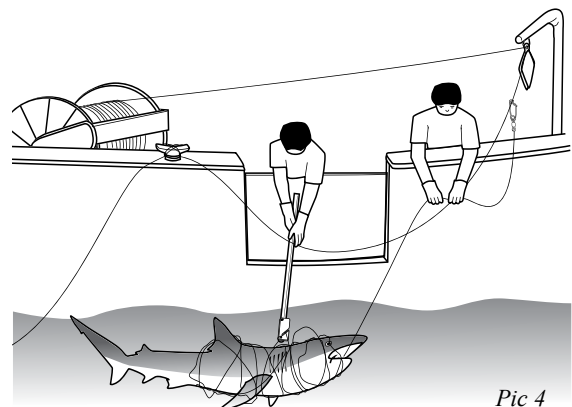
- If the fish is vigorously twisting and spinning making it too dangerous to use a dehooker, you tried to use a dehooker but couldn't get the hook out, or the shark/ray swallowed the hook and you can't see the hook, then use a long-handled line cutter to cut the line as close to the fish as safely possible (Picture 2).



- For sluggish sharks/rays, not vigorously twisting and spinning, if hooked, and you can see the hook in its body or mouth, use a long-handled dehooker to try to remove the hook (Picture 3).



- Determine how the line is wrapped and where to cut first in order to remove as much line from the fish as possible (Picture 4).



3. Bringing small sharks and manta rays onboard and initial steps once onboard

- Use a device with stiff filament (e.g., use multifilament and not single filament for netting) to lift the shark or manta ray gently onto the deck (Picture 5). If using a dipnet, reduce slack in the net by wrapping some netting around the neck of the base of the handle to reduce the potential for the fish to get entangled. If you use a gaff to lift the shark or manta ray on deck or to move it around the deck, only gaff it in the mouth.



- Place a small dead fish or stick into the shark's mouth (to prevent it from biting you) (Picture 6).

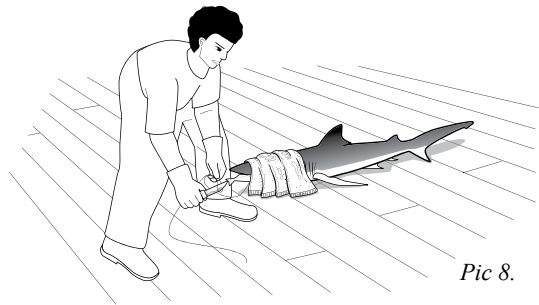


- If you anticipate that it will require more than 5 minutes to release a shark, then place a hose into its mouth so seawater is moderately flowing into it (Picture 7).



4. Removing hook and line from sharks and manta rays on deck

- Place a wet, dark-colored cloth over its eyes (don't press the eyes).
- If it swallowed the hook, cut as much line as possible (Picture 8). Don't pull too hard on the line. Don't attempt to remove the hook using a dehooker or by pulling on the branchline.



- If hooked, and hook is visible in the body or mouth, use a bolt cutter to remove the hook barb, and then remove the hook (Picture 9).



- Remove tangled line

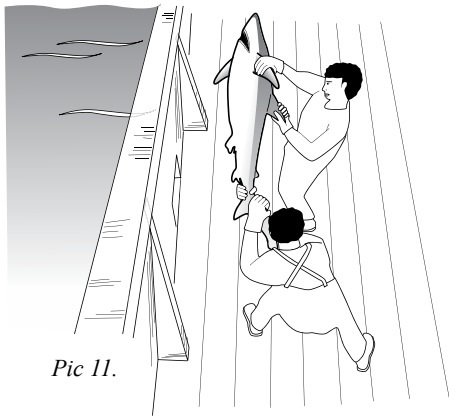
5. Handling and releasing sharks and manta rays from the deck

- If a shark is small enough for one person to carry, use two hands to lift the shark by wrapping both hands around the sides in front of the first side fin (Picture 10).



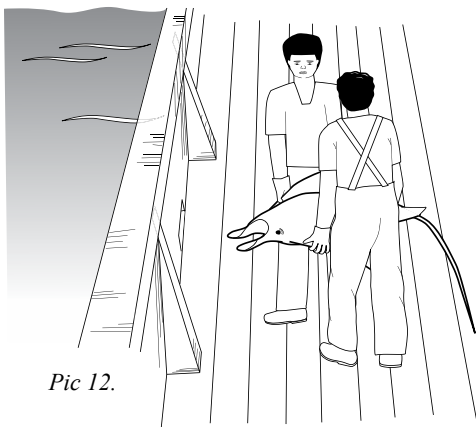
Pic 10.

- If two people are needed to carry the shark, one person hold the top and side fins, the second person holds the tail (Picture 11). Make sure that neither person lets go.



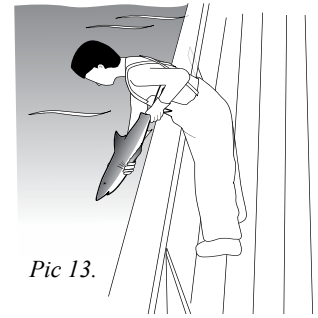
Pic 11.

- Carry manta rays by the sides of its wings (Picture 12).



Pic 12.

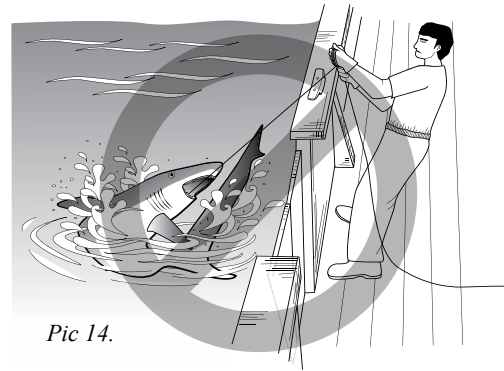
- Slow or stop the vessel.
- Gently drop (don't throw) the fish headfirst over the rail on the opposite side of the hauling station (Picture 13).



Pic 13.

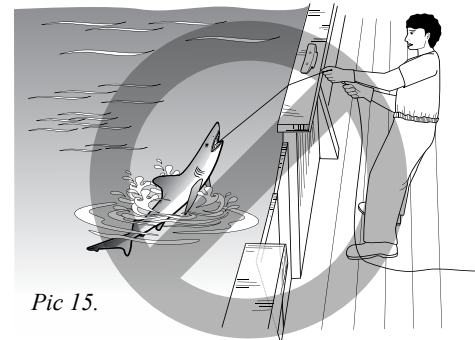
6. What not to do

- Don't wrap your fingers, hands or arms in the line when bringing a shark or ray to the boat – you might get pulled overboard (Picture 14).



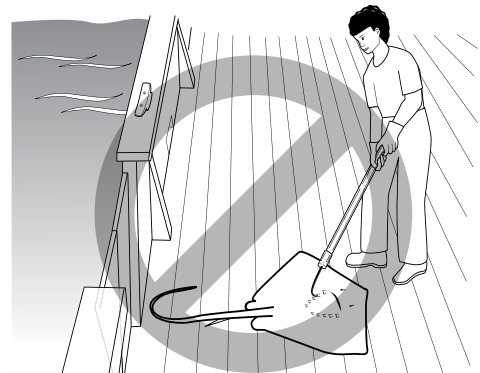
Pic 14.

- Don't lift them using the branchline, especially if hooked (Picture 15).



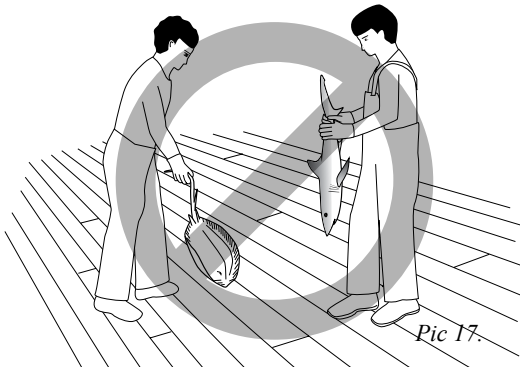
Pic 15.

- Don't use a gaff or other pointed object other than in the mouth (Picture 16).



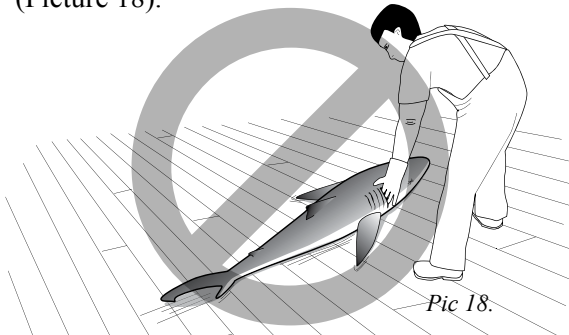
Pic 16.

- Don't lift them by the head or tail (when out of the water, gravity can damage internal organs and spine; handling a stingray especially by the tail risks getting stabbed by the stinger) (Picture 17).



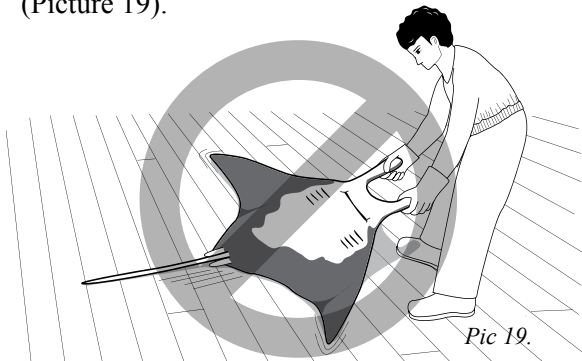
Pic 17.

- Don't lift or draft them by inserting your fingers into its gills (their gills are easily injured) (Picture 18).



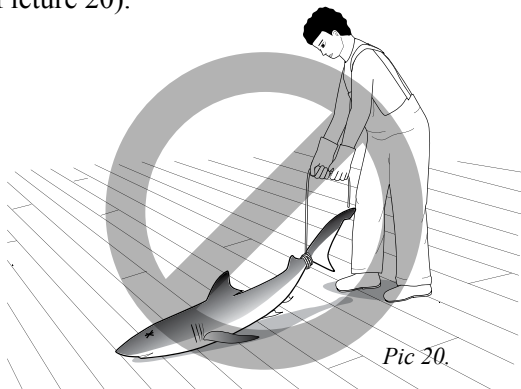
Pic 18.

- Don't lift or drag a manta ray only by its lobes (Picture 19).



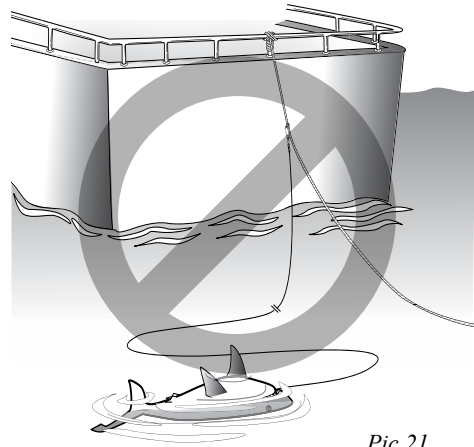
Pic 19.

- Don't tie a rope around them to lift or drag them (Picture 20).



Pic 20.

- Don't restrain them for a long time alongside the vessel (some species can suffocate if they can't freely move in the water). Don't use a 'lazy line' and tow the shark or ray astern (Picture 21)



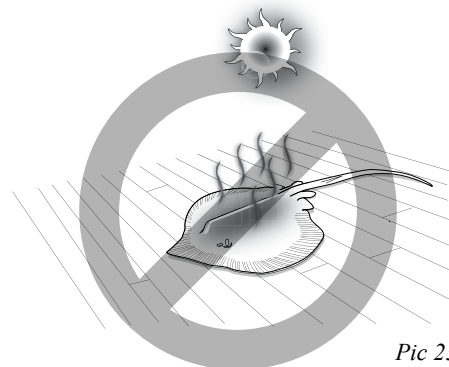
Pic 21.

- Don't put a lot of pressure on their body – including by pushing hard to hold them still when removing gear, or squeezing them when carrying them (Picture 22)



Pic 22.

- Don't put them on deck where there is direct sun exposure (Picture 23).



Pic 23.

- Don't bring large sharks or rays on deck.
- Don't bring stingrays on deck – there's too high a risk that you'll get stabbed with the stinger.
- Don't put them on deck where they could physically contact hard objects, including hard parts of other fish.
- Don't keep them out of the water too long.