



Sportfishing Club of the British Isles

Best Practice Guide on Fishing for Sharks

As an island nation it's perhaps not surprising that one of the most popular UK pastimes is sea fishing. As the sport has developed, anglers have become increasingly aware of the need to conserve the ocean and all its inhabitants and are now keen conservationists with many contributing to citizen science where they are able to.

The sport is a significant contributor to coastal economies and influences the choice of many family holidays. The most direct beneficiaries of the sport are charter skippers, crews and sales of fishing tackle. Other beneficiaries are hotels, bed-and-breakfast establishments, self-catering apartments, restaurants, cafes and pubs.

Anglers generally develop a lifelong interest in the sport and consequently it strengthens bonds within the anglers but also builds strong friendship networks within the coastal communities.

Sea fishing is crucial for introducing and connecting the next generation to the natural world, but we also face complex stewardship challenges, including balancing ecosystem conservation with social and economic benefits for the nation.

Fishing for sharks, or sharking, is an exciting and specialised aspect of sea fishing. Enjoyment of this sport comes with a responsibility to conserve sharks for future generations because sharks play an important part in regulating the ecological structure and function of our oceans. This simple guide has been written to give anglers and skippers clear advice on how to achieve that balance.

Be Prepared:

Sharks are strong fish and handling them requires experience, space, the correct equipment and detailed planning. Sharks are also sensitive and poor preparation increases the risk of them coming to harm.

The need for planning begins with the selection of appropriate tackle and method of capture all the way through to knowing exactly who is to do what when the time comes to photograph and release the fish.

(Species such as dogfish, tope, smoothhounds, rays etc. are not considered as sharks for the purposes of this guide)

Use the Correct Gear:

There is a wide range of sharking gear available from very light to very heavy. Good quality tackle will not be cheap, but neither is it necessary to purchase the most expensive gear available.

The use of light tackle that results in long fight times is not sporting and the resulting prolonged stress might lead to the shark dying.

Rods

Rods should have sufficient power to control the shark when necessary. Soft or very flexible rods used with very light tackle that lack backbone are to be avoided.

Line

Lines may be of nylon monofilament, braided dacron, braided HDPE (widely known as gelspun 'braid', Spectra or Dyneema) or a combination. If using dacron or HDPE, **always** use a topshot of nylon mono between the main line and the leader or trace. The topshot may be the same strength as the mainline or heavier and is intended to provide abrasion resistance should the line touch the shark's skin or the hull of the boat. A nylon topshot also provides a buffer that helps prevent line breakage that can occur when using HDPE braid; such braid is virtually stretch free and can snap quite readily if given a sharp tug. The connection between mainline and topshot needs to be constructed with care to maintain strength.

Leader or trace

Leaders or traces should be planned and constructed with care since they can take a lot of abuse during use. Only the most reliable swivels, links and crimping systems should be used and, along with the heavy nylon monofilament and cable also used in the leader, must be strong enough for the task. Seek the advice of an experienced shark angler if you are unsure. If purchasing ready-made leaders, check their quality and suitability; some are excellent but too many are virtually useless.

The leader should be in two sections: a 'biting trace' of wire cable between one and two metres/ yards in length and a long 'rubbing leader' of heavy nylon monofilament. Some experienced sharkers opt for cable for the rubbing leader but most now use heavy nylon monofilament, and this is to be preferred. (Experience from the USA and elsewhere with catching very large sharks from the shore shows that heavy nylon monofilament works for the rubbing leader.)

Leaders should be at least 15 feet long. This is to reduce the risk of the line parting should the shark roll in the leader. If your ready-made leaders are too short, you can add an additional length of heavy nylon above the top swivel to lengthen them.

Do not use single-strand wire for the leader; it could act like cheese wire when under strain and might lead to bad cuts to the shark. It is also more difficult to manage when it comes to the end game.

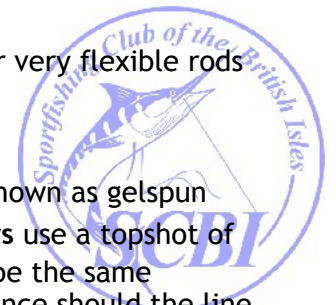
Sharks are rarely leader-shy, though this is not always the case. Both the mono and the cable can be thicker than strictly necessary for strength alone as thicker leaders are less likely to result in cuts to the shark and will withstand abrasion from the shark's skin.

Nylon monofilament for the rubbing leader should be a minimum of 1.8mm diameter for blue sharks; 2.0-2.2mm is better, and up to 2.5mm is not out of the question for larger species.

Cable should be at least 1.5mm or approximately 450lb and up to 2.0mm is not unreasonable. Both 19-strand and 49-strand cable is suitable, either stainless or galvanised. Whilst nylon-covered cable has been popular in the past, it is rarely possible to re-use it as the nylon coating will have been stripped by the teeth and skin of any shark caught.

On those rare occasions when the sharks are being leader-shy, finer cable (1.2mm or 175-275lb) can be used, but it will rarely last more than one fish without damage and it is possible a large shark might wear through it.

Never use any frayed cable or a monofilament leader with any cut or nick in it, however slight; slight scuffing of the heavy nylon is acceptable though. A damaged leader is a weak one and could easily lead to a lost fish, especially if the shark is a good one.



Swivels and links/clips

The two parts of the leader may be joined by a swivel or a link swivel. These should be of good quality and strong enough for the job.

Check the ends of Coastlock-style snaps and smooth them with a small file to ensure there are no sharp ends that could cause cuts, either to the shark or to anyone handling the leader.

If the Coastlock snap is damaged in any way, retire it and use a new leader.

Alternatively, a small shackle can be used between the middle swivel and the bite trace. Even the smallest of these are incredibly strong.

Don't forget to close the Coastlock snap!

Hooks

Do not use stainless steel hooks. If a shark escapes with a stainless hook attached, that hook and any leader and line will remain in place for a long time. A non-stainless hook will corrode and fall away much more quickly.

Do not use hooks that are offset in any way i.e. kirbed or reversed. Only use hooks that are flat or 'in line'.

Circle hooks are designed to hook the shark in the corner of the mouth, making unhooking easier. Circle hooks also remove the need to strike. Circle hooks are preferred to 'J' hooks for these reasons. If a 'J' hook must be used, any run must be struck quickly to reduce the risk of deep hooking.

The barb should be crushed flat or filed away. This makes unhooking easier.

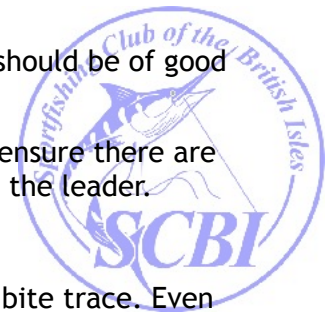
If you are unsure about any particular hook and its suitability, contact the SCBI and/or SACGB for help.



A selection of circle hooks from Mustad, VMC and Eagle Claw. Two are slightly offset, although it is not obvious in the photo, and are not recommended for sharks. Size numbers for circle hooks are confusing and do not correlate across different model numbers, even from a single manufacturer. The barbs should be crushed before use.

Floats

Do not use balloons for floats. They can be lost from the line and may be eaten by other marine species that mistake balloons for jellyfish. Balloons are also popular with gulls who will peck and pop them annoyingly.



All floats, regardless of the material they are made from, should be designed to remain attached to the line and not released into the sea on the strike. Do not add to marine litter.

Round floats are unable to show 'lift' bites; cylindrical or sausage-shaped floats are therefore preferable.

Weights

It may be desirable to add weight to the line if fishing baits at any depth. Lead weights may be attached permanently to slide on the nylon rubbing leader or attached via an elastic band. A zip slider can be fitted to the nylon leader during its construction so that leads can be added or changed as needed. Do not slide leads on the mainline itself as it may be weakened.

Butt pad and harness

These items should be readily to hand so that they can be fitted to the angler as needed. A good, wide, butt pad is recommended in all cases, whereas the harness may only be needed when called for by the angler.

A kidney harness or stand-up style bucket harness is preferred over the old-fashioned shoulder harness.

Not all anglers require a butt pad but the use of a padded butt cushion that slips on the end of the butt may be welcomed.

Fishing Technique:

Do not fish with more rods than can be managed by the anglers on board. When a shark is hooked, the spare lines must be quickly taken out of the water and stored, keeping the deck uncluttered and reducing the risk of a shark taking a second bait or tangling with the other lines. Keep the gunwale and rail free from obstructions, such as spare rods, that may impede the angler fighting the shark.

Always watch the floats so that any early indication of a bite is not missed. This reduces the risk of a shark swallowing the bait and becoming deeply hooked. Sharks do not always run away from the boat; a bite may show by the float lifting, dipping, moving sideways or towards the boat. These signs also lead to the line angle changing. Anglers should be looking for these signs at all times.

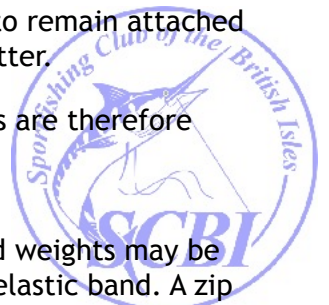
The angler should be given room to handle his fish and the tackle and not crowded by the other people on board, however enthusiastic.

Blue sharks in particular are prone to roll up in the leader. This prevents them from giving of their best and may result in them reaching the line and fraying through it. A shark lost when so wrapped is at risk. To minimise the chance of a wrap, the angler must pay constant attention to how the shark is acting throughout the fight. The line must not be allowed to go slack; a blue shark will quickly wrap itself if allowed slack line. At the same time, if the shark is held hard and not allowed to swim, it will respond by spinning and wrapping itself in the leader. Ideally, the shark should be in constant swimming motion whether running away from the boat or being worked towards it by the angler and rod.

Unhooking the shark and release at the side of the boat

The skipper should allocate tasks so that everyone knows their role.

The location of leadering gloves, the de-hooking tool, cable cutters and other items required to facilitate the quick and safe release of the shark should be checked. A safety knife/line cutter should be readily to hand should an emergency arise with the monofilament leader getting caught on a glove etc.





Leader gloves ready for use. Whether to use leather gauntlets or heavy plastic gloves is down to personal preference, provided they are tough enough to protect your hands. (Marking them with left and right can be a bonus in the heat of the moment.) Mates on game boats often soak leather gloves early in the day to make them supple when it comes to using them. Ensure everyone who is likely to handle the leader has their own gloves.



Essential equipment: T-bar unhooker, parallel-jaw pliers, line snips, cable cutters, a sharp knife, crimping tool and a safety knife/line cutter. The crimping tool is useful for crushing the hook barb and the parallel pliers have many uses on board. A sharp knife may be needed at a moment's notice to cut line or the rubbing leader whilst good quality, sharp cable cutters are needed to cut the cable should a hook not be easily removed with the T-bar. The safety knife will easily cut nylon monofilament up to 600lb and should be readily to hand. Always have spares of each of these items.



A blue shark being released at the side of the boat by use of an ARC de-hooker. Note the barbless circle hook in the angle of the jaw.

Do not use a gaff or tailer to bring the shark close to the boat. A second, experienced, person may take the leader in a gloved hand to pull the shark closer.

Use a de-hooking tool to remove the hook. Practice using the tool before having to deal with a shark.

Alternatively, use long-handled bolt cutters to chop the hook in half to release the shark quickly.

If the shark has been deeply hooked, cut the biting trace as close to the hook as possible. This requires sharp cable-cutters to be instantly at hand. The use of in-line circle hooks reduces this risk.

If the shark has become entangled in the leader, cut away the cable and mono to free the shark. Do not drop the pieces overboard!

Do not hold the shark by the gills as this can lead to serious injury and even death.

Only in exceptional circumstances* should a shark be brought aboard the boat. Unhooking and releasing the shark whilst it is still in the water is best for the shark. All photographs and weight/length estimates should be made with the shark in the water.



A blue shark correctly positioned on the deck and with a sea-water deck hose in place (Chris Avery photo)

***If a shark is seriously wrapped in gear and would undoubtedly die if released it may then need to be brought aboard, unless that gear can be removed without doing so. Please see separate advice note below.**

Size Estimates

Whilst it is understandable that anglers would like to get a close estimate of the size of any shark caught, it is no longer acceptable to kill a shark simply to weight it. Most experienced skippers and many anglers are able to estimate the weight of a shark whilst it is in the water and measurements of its length may be made using floating tape measures and examining photographs without bringing the shark on board.

Photographs/Video:

The first rule in taking pictures/video is to have the equipment readily available. Time lost looking for cameras needlessly increases the time taken to release the shark. Go Pros and similar systems are particularly useful when visual recording is required.

In all cases it is better to take a photograph/video of the shark in the water but if a shark has been boarded, photos/videos taken should be whilst the shark is on its side on the deck. When moving a shark, it is important to remember that their gills and internal organs are easily damaged because they are not protected by an internal skeleton.

Boarding and Release – in exceptional circumstances

Preferably release the fish at the side of the boat. Once again, boating sharks should not be undertaken except when it is essential to remove tangled traces or other gear that would otherwise seriously risk the health of the shark when released.

Bring the shark aboard horizontally so as not to tear any ligaments or tendons or to damage organs. Small sharks (circa 30lb) are best handled with both hands, one on the dorsal fin, pectoral fin or neck (i.e. between the gills and the dorsal fin) and the other holding the tail or supporting the body.

Medium to large sharks should be handled by two persons. One person holds the head, dorsal fin and/or pectoral fin while the other holds the tail and supports the body. The belly and teeth should always face away from the handlers. Do not drag the shark across the gunwale.

The shark should be laid on its side on a soft area rather than a hard deck. This can be achieved by using a damp mat. At a very minimum the deck should be well doused with water to keep it cool and moist. A soft, wet cloth placed over the eye will help calm the shark.

Do not forcefully restrain the shark. The shark should be held by its head, midsection and tail with the belly and teeth facing away from the handler(s). Never put your hand on the tip of its nose as this is the location of some of its most important sensory organs. Do not hold the shark by the gills as this can lead to serious injury and even death.

Use a de-hooking tool to remove the hook or hooks or cut the hook in two with bolt cutters. If the hook is not easily seen, then cut the trace as close to the hook as possible. Do not attempt to remove a hook by entering via the gills; they are delicate and easily damaged. Use sharp cutters to remove any other gear, line, netting etc.

Be as quick as possible without endangering either you or the fish. This means that everyone aboard should know their role before a shark is brought aboard: who is to control the shark, who is to do the unhooking and cutting, and who is to take photographs. Everyone else should keep clear.

A blue shark can turn to bite its own tail. This increases the need for all involved to take care and for everyone else to stay clear.

The tail of a thresher shark is particularly dangerous and needs to be controlled carefully.

If the shark is to be out of the water for more than a minute or two minute then it may be ventilated by running salt water in its mouth or by directing salt water across the outside of the gills. Ensure the boat hose is put on a low-pressure setting, providing a gentle flow and is running before putting it in the shark's mouth. (A high-pressure water feed may easily cause damage to the shark.) Care must be taken not to push the hose down its throat.

Please remember sharks are too valuable to be caught just once. We owe it to them to treat them with care and ensure a safe release.

This best practice document has been prepared by the
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