

UNHOOKING PIKE SAFELY

by E-Sox Consultant, Steve Rowley

Pike are at their most vulnerable as they slip over the net cord, from that moment on they are at the complete control of the angler that caught them.

If they get lucky, they will have been caught by an experienced angler who knows how to safely unhook, quickly weigh and photograph them, before setting them free, if not, they are potentially in trouble.

Whatever you think about the ferocious looking pike, they are one of the most fragile fishes in our waters. They react badly to warmer water with lower oxygen levels, and they are extremely susceptible to pollution and poor water quality. More seriously, they don't take well to being handled badly when caught.

The thing is, you have to gain experience to become that competent pike angler. Lets face it, a thrashing pike with razor sharp teeth can be a daunting prospect even for the best of us, but someone new to this game will find it very difficult to manage what can be a fairly scary few minutes.

Let's get one thing straight, there is not a pike angler on the planet who doesn't have a tough time with certain unhooking situations. Unfortunately, even the very best, most experienced will on the odd occasion be faced with a deep hooking situation, so it's not just beginners who have to deal with these problems. The big difference is that the experienced angler will know how to deal with difficult hook holds or deep hooking. This is where the experience really counts. As long as you have the right tools you can unhook a pike no matter where they are hooked.

Once a pike is in the net, I have a regimented routine, one that I have carried out so many times it is now complete habit. Hopefully this article will help you unhook more pike safely with minimum stress to the fish.

**MY SIMPLE UNHOOKING
PROCESS FOR PIKE:**

Step 1: Once in the landing net, leave the fish for a few minutes while you get your equipment ready. This allows the fish to take a breath, and allows everything, including you to calm down. Be careful to make sure the net is secured so that the pike cannot escape.

Step 2: Once everything is prepared and ready, I place the fish carefully onto a large, wet unhooking mat.

Step 3: Take a few seconds to try and establish where the hooks are likely to be in the mouth, and make sure there are no loose trebles outside of the mouth. This is very important, because once you put your fingers under the gill plate, they need to be away from the trebles, just in case the fish thrashes about. These first few seconds are key to the whole unhooking process, and something that you will do automatically once you are experienced.

Step 4: If I have a big pike, I kneel either side of it, on the mat. I don't put any body weight on the pike, merely provide a support should it start to thrash about.

Step 5: Once the fish has settled, I slide my fingers carefully under the gill plates and work them up to the top, until you get to the point where your fingers can go no further. This is now the point where you take a firm, but careful grip and lift the fish's head. The mouth should now open and allow you to see the hooks. This is the point where you have to be the boss and grip tightly if the fish starts to thrash about. More damage can be done to the fish and the angler if you fumble around at this point. Grip tightly and you will be OK.

Step 6: When the fish is still, and you have a good solid grip, pick up your long nose forceps and start to grip the first treble (the nearest one to you). You will need to set this free, before you can go deeper to release the second hook. This is where semi-barbed hooks are a godsend, because they are much easier to release and cause less damage to the pike.

Step 7: Once the first hook is free, turn your attention to the second one. If you have a deep hooking situation, it is likely to be this hook that is either in the entrance to the throat, or maybe even out of site. Don't worry too much, because if you apply gentle but firm pressure on the



Kneel either side of the pike to provide support while unhooking.



Unhooking the bottom treble carefully through the gill cover.



Use a pike tube, well pegged out in the margin to rest a fish before releasing.

trace, the throat will start to gradually open and stretch towards you, and very quickly you should be able to see the hook. While holding the pressure, put your forceps carefully through the gill plate and grab the main body of the hook, then turn the hook away from the throat, and the barbs should pop out. This really is when semi barbed hooks come into their own, because they turn out of the throat very easily. Once this hook is released, make sure the throat goes back down into its normal position. As long as you do the whole

process with care, and don't pull too hard on the throat, all will be OK.

Step 8: If the unhooking part takes a few minutes, I will always put the fish either back in the landing net, or, more often than not in my pike tube. This is a crucial part of the process, and allows the fish time to recover safely.

Step 9: Once I have everything organised and the fish has had a rest I will fetch it out of the tube, quickly weigh it and take a few photographs

above the unhooking mat, then get the fish straight back, holding it until it can swim away strongly.

If you follow these guidelines, and take care of your fish from start to finish, it will go back safely, and quickly recover from its experience. Just take special care with every part of the process, while always being firm. More damage is caused to fish and anglers when a fish is allowed to thrash around completely out of control, so be the boss!



After a quick photograph the well rested pike is returned to her home.