

Venting Reef Fishes

Why Vent a Fish?

Many reef fish have a gas-filled swim bladder used to control buoyancy. When they are caught and retrieved from deep water the gas expands due to the pressure decreasing in shallower water. Snapper, grouper and other bottomfish often suffer from a ruptured swim bladder—often causing the stomach to protrude from the mouth. This can prevent the fish from returning to the bottom quickly when released and can make it much more vulnerable to predation by other fish, birds or mammals. Reef fish populations, particularly red snapper and grouper, are being negatively affected by the number of released (discarded) fish that don't survive. Venting can improve the chances of survival.

When to Vent

If the fish displays an everted stomach or distended intestines, the fish should be vented. If the fish's abdomen appears bloated the fish should be vented.

How to Vent

Hold the fish gently but firmly on its side. Place a hollow large-bore needle at a point about an inch or two behind the base of the pectoral fin. Insert the needle downward at a 45-degree angle to the body of the fish, only deep enough to release the gases. Listen for the escaping gases. The sound of escaping gas is audible and deflation is noticeable. If the fish is extremely bloated, use your hand to hold the fish and exert gentle pressure on the fish's abdomen. After venting is complete, remove the needle and *gently* release fish. If a fish requires resuscitation, revive it by holding the head pointed downward and move the fish back and forth to pass water over the gills until the fish is able to swim away unassisted. Sterilize needle with a bleach and water solution after each trip.

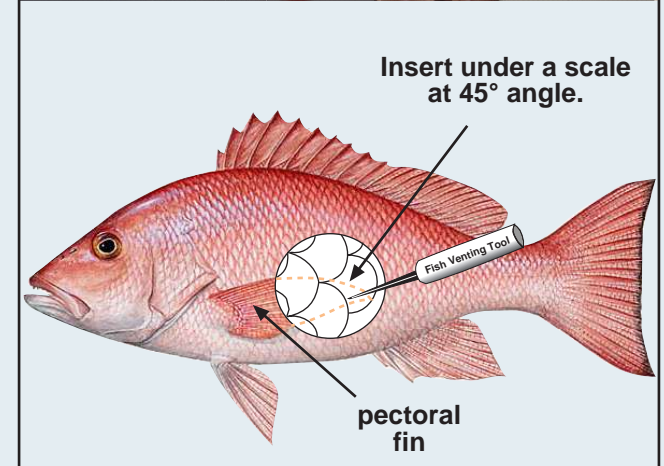
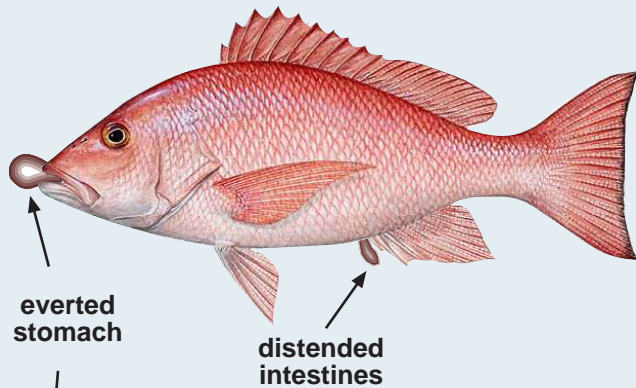
What Not to Do

Do not puncture the balloon-like sack protruding from the mouth. This is actually the stomach, not the swim bladder.

Do not attempt to push the stomach back into the body; it will retract naturally after the fish is vented and released.

Do not use a hook or an ice pick to vent a fish. Often, the swim bladder has already ruptured and gas must be released from the body cavity. Simply puncturing the fish is undesirable and can result in a mortal injury. The hollow needle of the venting tool allows for more rapid healing.

Do not wait to vent the fish. Work quickly and return the fish to the water.



Fish venting tool



Mississippi - Alabama Seagrass Consortium and Alabama Marine Resources Division will have Fish Venting Kits available.

Contact:
Sea Grant - Mobile Office - 251-438-5690
Marine Resources Division
Gulf Shores Office - 251-968-7576
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