

STARTING THEM YOUNG.....

Best catch and release practices when fishing with kids





With a 5-year old who is super keen on his fishing, I have been thinking a lot about best catch and release practices with kids. Inevitably, a fish arrives on the beach or bank, flaps around in the sand for some time, while people rush off to get their camera. The kid then grabs the fish, gets stabbed by a sharp dorsal spine and in the ensuing chaos, the fish ends up out of the water for five minutes, full of sand and injured beyond recovery.



Obviously it is tough, because your youngster is inexperienced, does not know how to handle a fish (or may even be scared to hold it), and you want to get the best photographs for him or her to show their family and friends. But, as a keen fisherman (with a keener 5-year old) and a fisheries scientist, who has been working on recreational fisheries and the impacts of catch and release fishing for almost 15 years, I think that I can offer these words of advice to parents and mentors of youngsters when releasing fish:

BEFORE FISHING

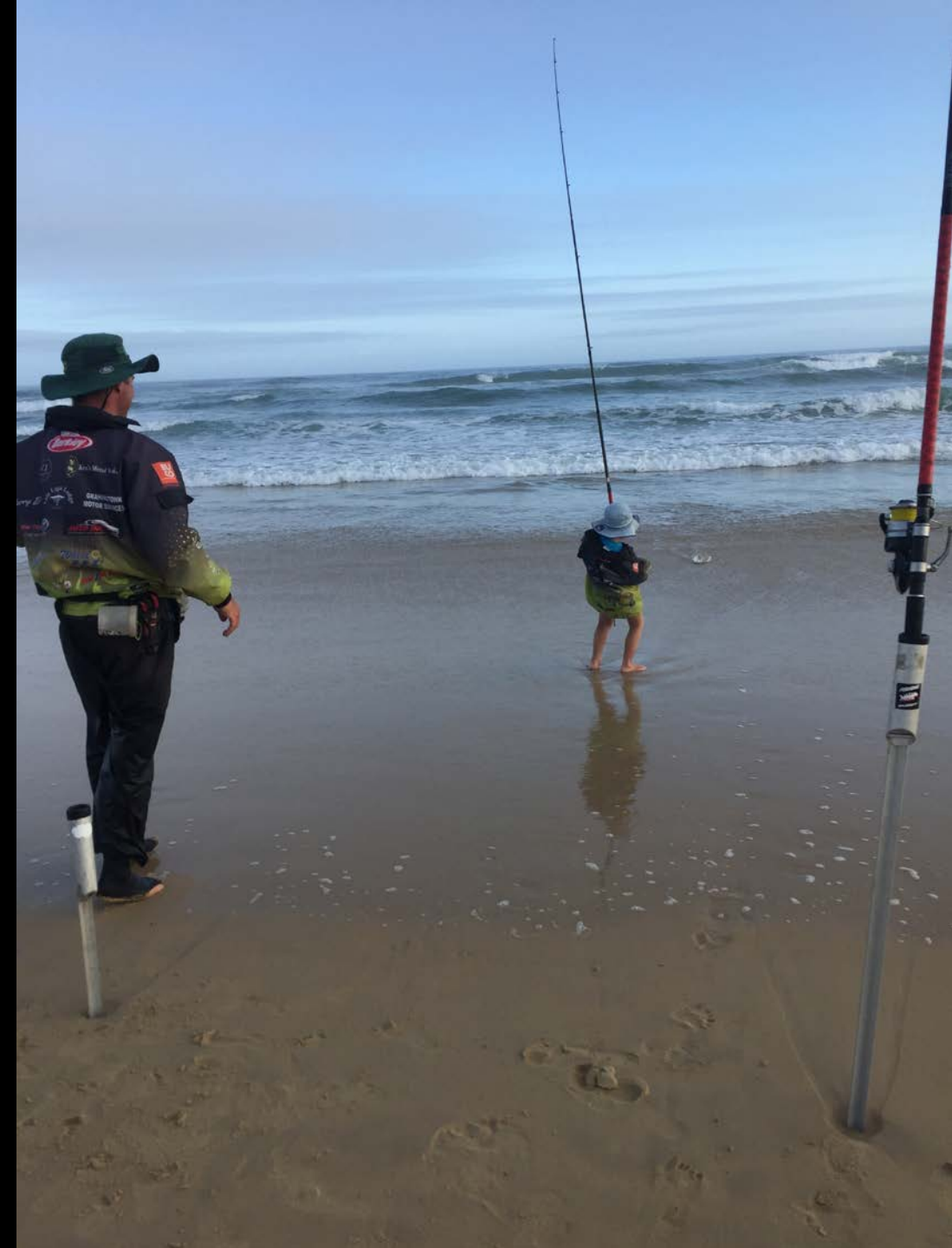
BE ORGANISED

- 1) Have a camera, pliers, scissors (to cut line) on your possession
- 2) Have a bucket full of fresh sea (or estuary) water near where you are expecting to land the fish (rock pools are also good)
- 3) If you are interested in weight, have a measuring mat, wet and ready, in or near the bucket (you can estimate weight later from conversion tables)
- 4) Let your child know the process, so that they are expecting what you tell them to do



WHEN FIGHTING A FISH

- 1) Help or advise, if necessary, to ensure that the fish is safely landed (i.e. away from rocks or other objects that may damage the fish)



AFTER LANDING THE FISH

- 1) Get to the fish as quickly as possible, so that it is not dragged up onto the sand (particularly the dry sand)
- 2) Carry the fish properly. Small fish < 500g can be carried by the line (unless they are hooked deep). Larger fish should be held under their pectoral girdle (just behind the head) and at the caudal peduncle (the section just before the tail)
- 3) Place the fish into the bucket as soon as possible. Once this is done, you can get organised and calm the often very frantic and excited process down



AFTER LANDING THE FISH

- 5) Place a cloth over the fish's head, so that it cannot see and calms down
- 6) Get your camera, pliers and measuring mat (if needed) ready
- 7) Unhook the fish, while it is still in the bucket (i.e. with its head underwater)



AFTER LANDING THE FISH

- 8) Get your child into position for the photo (back to the sea or up the beach often makes the best photo) and tell them how to hold the fish (i.e. a hand under their pectoral girdle- just behind the head and just before the tail)
- 9) It may be better to pass the fish to the child, as they will not know (or be scared) how to pick it up
- 10) Make sure they hold the fish just above the bucket (in a kneeling position), so that it lands in the bucket if it is dropped



Just passed the cracker to Josh (who is on his knees, with the fish above the bucket for his photo). Note the pliers easily available on my belt and the waterproof holder around my neck for my phone/camera

RELEASING THE FISH

- 1) Best is to carry the fish in the bucket (with your child) until they know the drill, but a quick release by hand immediately (if they are close to the water) after the photo will also work
- 2) Wait for an oncoming wave and release it (pour it out of the bucket without touching it) behind the wave



Josh about to release a shad

You won't always get it right (we don't), especially in the beginning, but things should get smoother as you and your child practices. If you get it right however, your child will grow up not only keen to release fish, but also develop practices that ensure that released fish have the best chance of survival. We could all do with that!

