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I am the 'Release Nazi'

No fish for you!

As the 100th issue of Florida Fishing Weekly rolled off the press last week, I tried to pump myself up for the winter sailfish season with the success of asking a malcontented teenager to pull up his pants, but I just didn't have the jones to push it. The spirit just wasn't there.

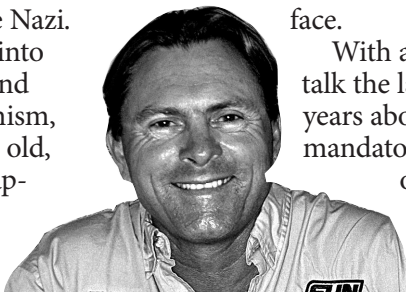
I don't know if I'm getting old and tired, have too many of life's burdens to shoulder, or am just getting weak of heart, but lately, I've found myself siding more with the fish and less with the anglers. In other words, fishing, and anglers in particular, are starting to jade my thoughts.

It's odd how our lives and attitudes morph over time to the point that we become our parents. Not long ago I was "cool", now I offer more stern guidance than hip sarcasm. That transformation doesn't take place overnight, but it does seem to happen in a short stretch, say a season or two. And that's where I'm at. I'm the geezer who is going to try to get you to respect the fish. I am the Release Nazi.

I'd like to say I go into this with an open mind and shrouds of optimism, but I'm too tired, too old, and too damned disappointed with what I see every time I put

my boat in the water to think things are going to change. The direction fishing is heading, with decal-wrapped boats and multi-layered logos on everything from shirts to cell phone holders, just makes me want to stab my eyes with a gaff and let the vitreous humor flow like a opened vein.

Which brings us back to sailfish season and, more specifically, sailfish tournaments, the multi-national affairs that promote the release of a fish with 14 feet of leader hanging from its face. Now, I'm not saying the fish dies whenever you cut the leader instead of retrieving the hook, but I'll venture that the latter has a larger survival rate. After all, a lip piercing has got to be easier on a fish than trailing an entire weed eater cord from its face.



With all the talk the last few years about the mandatory use of circle hooks in



seems to vocalize the obvious. Everyone is in too much of a rush to get another bait out to pay respect to the fish they just caught.

For some reason, recreational anglers have no qualms about removing the hook from a sailfish before sending it on its way, although inexperience in handling fish does lead this quarter to some

sketchy photo practices and the ever popular "toss overboard."

billfish tournaments, it just grates my carrots to see a guy who attains glory by having the boat reel in a fish for him not show the respect due by releasing the fish sans hook and leader.

It's as inappropriate as an old man putting his hand on a little boy's leg, yet like Paris Hilton's crooked beak, no one

But the recreational anglers aren't the ones catching hundreds of billfish every year, and they're certainly not the ones whose livelihoods depend on a viable sailfish population. As professionals, charterboat captains and mates should have enough understanding and knowledge of the fish they pursue to have the vision of what they must do to assure they'll be around long enough to pay off the boat. And tournament organizers should be laying the planks on this dock.

Assuming everyone involved, including the sailfish, would like to have the hook removed as quickly and painlessly as possible, tournaments could require a dehooking device on board every boat. The fish would never have to be touched, the hook could be removed, and the team given an extra point for retrieval. To add information to benefit, add another point for tagging the fish and helping scientists monitor the populations.

It's a win-win proposition that does the least harm to the fish, and would help dull the issue of effects on the sailfish populations from a season of grab and cut. It would require the angler to actually control the fish, making it more of a rewarding and acceptable catch by everyone standards, while at the same time showing a respect for a gamefish celebrated throughout its range.

It would also hurt me up which, given the commitments of three kids, a wife and a perpetually heavy schedule that doesn't allow me to fish every day like I want, it's the best way to keep the Release Nazi from yelling at the dock.

BELOW SEA LEVEL

By Editor Mike Holliday

mikeh@floridafishingweekly.com







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