

Introduction

Returning catfish alive & well is more important than any measurement, weight & even any trophy photo, this article will not necessarily catch you more or bigger catfish but better help you look after your catch, capture it on film & ensure its safe return for another days fishing.

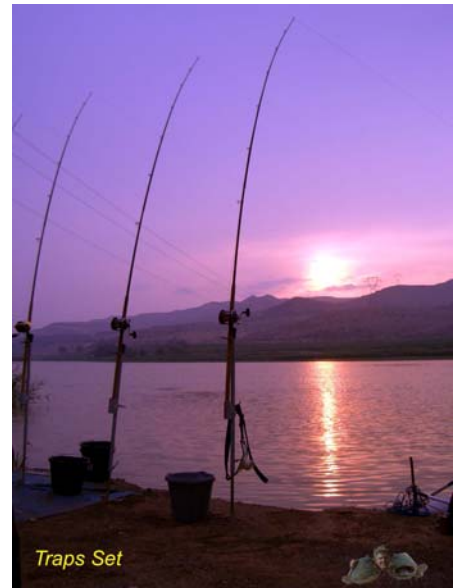
In an ideal world every fishing swim would have an unhooking mat already pegged out ready for you to use. Unfortunately this is not the case on the Ebro where 200lb monsters freely roam. In most instances the flat areas of bank that are suitable for bringing the fish up on to are rock strewn & rough.

Catfish in the waters around Mequinenza grow to over 200lbs, in order to safely secure, photo & return your fish you will need to be at some point waist deep in the margins. If you fear big fish, deep fast flowing water, physically incapable through age or disability, then you may not care for the fish properly & may need a guide who sets the example.

For a little effort, a bit of thought & literally a few pounds, you can automatically gain levels of respect from local anglers, more importantly the local water bailiff & the police when they see that you are thinking about fish care & safe return.

Local attitudes towards fish return have started to change as they realise the revenue from the fishermen, its longevity through proper care & the safe return of large female catfish.

Catfish care starts before you even get the baits out. Being prepared for your first take ensures you relax, read the fishes movements & respond with confidence due to there not being panic amidst your feet as friends best prepare for the unknown.



Swim safety

First look at your swim & identify foremost where you are going to manoeuvre the catfish up & out of the water & onto the bank. Forming a ramp to transfer your prize may require some hard work & effort by clearing rocks both bank side & those submerged in the margins, to form in effect a slope free from sharp edges from the waters edge to the bank level you are fishing from.

Upon achieving your slope, cover it with a sheet of plastic or a ground sheet to protect the fish from any sharp stones & gravel that will scratch the fish as you remove it from the water & onto the bank & into position for weighing or photographing

After putting the baits out make sure you have plenty of water on the bank ready to pour on the mat & the fish.

Safely up on the bank



When fishing on a budget an ideal way to protect the fish you catch is to purchase a standard sleeping bag from Argos, open out & cover with a sheet of polythene (5m x 5m minimum) that is then pegged tight to form suitable protection.

Use a smaller piece of sheet to cover your ramp & peg the top so it meets your bank mat. Always bring & return your fish using the ramp head first in a slow, deliberate fashion supporting the bulk of the fish wherever possible.

Try & keep on the mat time down to a minimum especially in the sun.

To gauge length run a tape measure from the tip of the tail to the bottom lip of the cat.

Make sure you have a proper weigh sling that ensures the catfish will not slip out when being held up for a weigh reading. Use a weigh bar or strong bank stick between two people for lifting.

Weights & Measures



Safely back using ramp



Damage is already being seen like this dislocated or even broken jaw below on this young catfish. When using ropes to bring large cats out of the water, this cannot be done alone & need the support & help from as many able bodied people as possible. When manoeuvring catfish by the mouth on a wet mat be mindful of a safe grip & take care of the defensive flexed pectoral fins. These flexed pectorals if massaged will fold back normal allowing you to move the fish back & fourth.

Back in the margins



Fish Care made easy



In Spain as you know most days are more than sunny than not, even in the evenings the dry heat lingers & fish on mats soon dry out. When you have a fish on the bank make sure you put plenty of water over it but particularly through the mouth so it gently trickles out through the gills.

The trick is not to put or force too much in too quickly as they react such they either think they're back in the river or by most a reaction to the shock is to turn & thrash on the mat, they do not like it.

Pulling your catfish up a dry slope or moving it around on any part of a dry mat removes its protective membrane of slime on contact & causes burns that are avoidable.

Wet plastic is ideal for turning your fish for unhooking, weighing & manoeuvring into place for photos.



These burns are most noticeable in fish when taking the photo. The burns pictured have healed well but never the less are avoidable by a more conscientious angler.

Playing the fish comes naturally, the emotions & experience resulting in it nearing the margins to be gloved is one best described by you later in the pub back home with a tale of the one that was this big.

Gloves are best worn, as the pads both top & bottom just inside the mouth can be very sharp in young fish & will take off your skin on contact with any part of hand or arm leaving you literally red raw. This red rawness does heal eventually & does rub off your tan but it usually goes septic so ensure your tetanus immunisation is up to date.

When the fish has been gloved ensure that the slope & mat are wet, this can take up to 6 buckets of water, so you need to be prepared. Firstly stand back, admire & respect your catch irrespective of size, then weigh & measure it & capture the moment on film if desired.

When gloving a cat for the first time it is best to wear two gloves, take the hook link in one hand & guide the mouth to the surface & place your other hand into the opposite side from where the fish is hooked. This gives you a better chance of not you getting hooked up to a big cat, that either swims gently back out into the river with you still attached, even worse have you toppling overboard & to a depth or feature most frequented by your quarry.



Hold on



Bank shots are nice but water shots are the best practice for fish care. Be surrounded by water than a blue mat over your fireplace.



It is advisable when handling the fish that all loose jewellery is removed just in case the sharp edge of a watch, ring or necklace pendant tares the fish or gets caught up in one of its whiskers in some way shape or form.

After being lifting for the photo, the fish must be lowered down to the mat as gently as possible & again dowsed in water as there is a lot of strain on the catfish internally associated with its lifting. Whilst out of the water this best practice will minimise any stress brought on by being caught & displayed in the open air.

Grip on the pectoral fin is essential for holding your fish when displaying it for camera, my personal view is that it is best to photograph all large fish in the water as it reduces the amount of time on bank & there is less risk of damage to your fish. Pictured Below is a poor pectoral fin grip



Holding a 200lb+ bar of soap is easier said than done, this one at 212lb could have been better displayed with the help of a fourth person holding out the tail but positioning of hands & correct grip ensured a good picture.



Out of shot at the head end should be a gloved angler ready to take the mouth & support the chin & belly as it is lowered after the photo shoot.



When holding a pectoral fin it is best to have all four fingers gripped tightly in unison over the thickest joining piece of cartilage as it allows you to pull the fishes head & shoulders down horizontal to the camera. If you do not achieve these types of grip, then you are more likely to drop the heaviest part of the fish.



If there are more than two of you lifting, the one who caught the fish usually is positioned for photo at the head end of the fish, with several volunteers supporting the tail section; you can use two hands to lift the bulk of the fish, an overlapping two-handed grip as shown right



When supporting the mid section (where the catfish's stomach & tail meet) it is best to grip gently the anal fins together & lift putting the strain of your forearm in the meat of the tail as opposed to compressing the stomach. Being anywhere near the anal fins & lifting such a weight can result, if these anal fins are not being held properly, in warm fingers!

Pectoral Lift grip should always be obtained by holding either side of the meat of the pec bulb. Never lift a catfish up out the water by its gill plates, as any contact with the gills themselves may cause un-necessary heavy bleeding.



Lifting is best done in short bursts on the bank, as you will need energy to lift the fish solo in the water. After carefully manoeuvring the fish back into the margins, when lifting using the grips pictured you will be able to lift & lock your legs at about waist deep in water as the river supports the tail & takes some of the weight.

It is best that both knees be on the floor when lifting up a catfish to the cameras as it better displays the fishes natural profile, a knee up to rest the cats chin on looks ok, if the opposite knee was up & touching the cats stomach, the rib cage would be resting on the knee, this as previously stated displays fish length in an unnatural profile

Bad Knee Placement



Better Knee Placement

The water carries oxygen & the gills process this as do our lungs never the less as the cat sits out of water it will gulp in air, this air, if retained in the cat's stomach may be fatal if not removed. You can easily tell if any air needs evicting by placing the cat back in the water. If the fish tilts to one side & left for just a moment you will see exactly where the pocket of air is sitting & can go about burping the catfish into swimming off strongly.

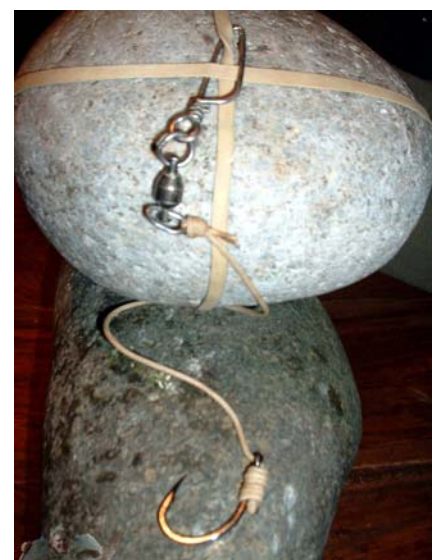


When returning the cat, you must rub the air taken in whilst sat on the bank back out of its stomach, dependant on how long out & how big the fish is, it is achieved by ensuring the gills are submerged & the tummy rubbed like you would burp a baby, if you have never burped a baby its like gently but purposefully rubbing a bird stain off your previously polished car bonnet. You will see large plumes of bubbles as the air is released if both gill plates are underwater. If your fish has had a hard fight take it out into the margins & ensure that it is upright with nothing in direct contact with its lateral line, it will soon swim off.

There are numerous advantages of fishing with large round pebbles secured to a running clip swivel by rubber band. I have learned that one pound of lead fixed to the line either semi or running by the same clip swivel has detrimental effects to hook holds, the lead bounces around loosens & even pops hooks out of turning fish & results in mouth damage. With this method you obtain a direct line to your hook hold & not your lead weight. Heavy leads get snagged & tend to lead the fishes head down towards the river bottom. When a pebble rolls out of a band a direct line to the fishes mouth is obtained, it usually results in playing the fish in the upper levels of the water giving you better control, increased rod tip sensitivity & quicker response times when playing turning & long, fast running fish as well as having better direction on the fish if fishing near snags.

When fishing mud flats over long sessions, new environments are created in the form of small bars & mounds of pebbles if you are good at placing baits on the same spots in the main flow of the river consistently. These in are then frequented & commandeered in time as home by crayfish, patrolled by the carp & acts as a dinner plate for the catfish. When baited regularly, these features will provide the edge on fishing the barren mud flanks of flooded valley, this is also a cost effective way of presenting baits in the main flow.

Pebble Rig





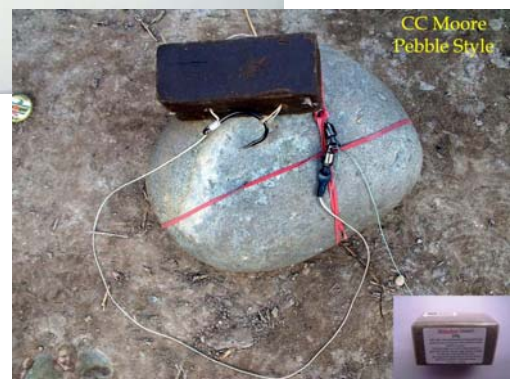
Single hooks, elastic bands, clip swivels & 5lb pebbles are not the most common items in a cat fisherman's tackle box until now. The pebble rig & its variations for carp & catfish will prove to be one of the most effective river rigs to date.



Free Running or Fixed Pebble Rig

The pebble rig was born from a number of theories I had about the relationship between hook holds & free lead weight movements.

No rig can really guarantee the same hook hold for a given number of times in exactly the same part of the mouth.



Hook holds are the single most important part of my fishing as without a good one there is little chance of landing 200lb specimen fish. These lead weights were previously presented on flooded mud flats & sometimes would penetrate the surface crust of the silt & mud, hook-link & hook bait thus being buried for the duration of many a fishing session.

Hook links were lengthened initially but when hooking any size of catfish I was conscious that I only had a direct line to the 11lb lead & not the hook hold. When fishing with these heavy lead weights I had little control & direction over the fish as the lead weight would most often dictate & take the fight out of the fish for me.

The 11lb weight bounced from side to side as the catfish availed my attempt to near them to the margin for gloving, often leading the fishes head towards the river bed & more often than not resulted in small tears & double hook holds in addition to hooks popping out as the fish was nearing sight.

The results from bad hook holds were most apparent when unhooking & repairing such damage & re-thinking my rig mechanics became a number one priority.

I have always loved the idea & fished many a time with the free lined live & static bottom bait method. The only disadvantage of this is that you are limited as to the distance fished from the bank although bite indication does not pose too many a problem.



The weight is a very important factor not only to hold bottom but to aid in hook penetration when the hair rigged bait is sucked in & spat out. I had used breakaway rocks tied to weak-links initially, but under moonlight & many a spotlight I longed for a permanent weight retainer to speed baiting up & setting rods to features.

In my childhood I had played with many an elastic band & one fishing session saw the rubber band & a clip swivel in unison to form a free running retainer of large round pebbles.

My initial trials saw me landing fish in addition to a 5lb pebble which not surprisingly enough is very hard to play on its own at 200 yards let alone with a Wels catfish on the end.

Having experimented with several band types & numbers with different weights & shape of pebble I started to land every fish that took the hook bait. My increase & overall catch rate is made up of many factors including lady luck but are mainly attributed to the mechanics & positioning of my rigs.

I noticed that the energy produced when the clipped band ejected the pebble was enough to hook the fish, leaving the pebble in place & the rod bent flat with a direct line to the hook hold as opposed to any awkward play from any weight.

Over time, many pebbles were deposited in a few selected areas covering some 10km of river. These pebbles in turn formed bars & mounds on otherwise barren mud flats & were soon home to families of crayfish, clouds of water flea & regularly patrolled by the carp.

When baited these areas would become a hive of activity, the types of noise, signals & movement given off was such that no catfish would resist investigation. Pebbles can be fished fixed or free running even though eventually they are ejected from the bands. I found using fixed pebbles in certain areas required longer hook lengths due to depth of soft mud & silt.

When fishing with short hook links on hard bottom the takes would be the fiercest, with the rod initially being very hard to lift from the rest due to the amount of force applied by the freshly hooked fast running fish.

When fishing longer hook links nearing 1 metre in length I found typically the rod nodding away as the cat carried on feeding, moving its head from side to side oblivious of being hooked & intent on scoffing the entire free pellet that baited the trap.

Hook bait presentation is also very important as this is the difference between landing & pulling out of a fish half way to the bank. When using pellet I always tie a hair using 30lb 0.33mm braid to the back of the shank of the hook & present my baits on this so they are free from the hook.

The length of my hair usually is long enough to accommodate eight 28mm drilled hook baits & looped with an over hand knot at the free end. It is important that the hook baits do not come into contact with the bend of the hook when manoeuvred as this will mask its point & result in missed takes.



The hair is baited then doubled round & placed over the bend of the hook with a few securing turns to form a loop or ring of pellet that sits free from the bend of the hook.

I tend to use a knot known to me as a no knot hook knot; this is not to be confused with the knotless knot & associated hair positioning problems. My hair knot sits under the no knot hook knot which is whipped to the shank of the hook & then passed through the back of the eye in order for the hook to turn & set properly.

The hook link can be tied to the swivel with a Palomar knot, the clip swivel is either attached to form a fixed weight rig or a bead is placed on the mainline braid allowing the clip to free run.

I have found that large flat smooth pebbles are best as its surface area tends less to penetrate any silt or mud crust, heavy round ones like hot potatoes are the worst for getting buried.

When banding the pebble it must be done with several twists to allow the band to roll the pebble from its grasp. I have found rubber bands to be an ideal retainer due to flexibility. Bands of Velcro & bicycle tyre inner tubes are poor substitutes & often more expensive & far better than using mono breakaway link rig.

This rig can be used in all sorts of situations from the boat or from the bank; I have presented live baits anchored to the river bed as well as the favoured meal of pellet & even used this rig on a scaled down version for my carp fishing as these pebbles in a smaller size are very castable.

In addition to its rig mechanics the pebbles are capable of absorbing small volumes of flavour & oil, ideal for fish attraction. I have several tubs of casting pebbles (4 - 6 oz) permanently in soak & to an extent in certain situations are more beneficial for fish attraction than a food source due to time release.



Mouth Damage



In most areas most patrolled by the cats you will need a minimum of 1lb of weight to successfully present bottom baits in the flow. This 1lb of lead is fixed either fully or semi & by using this results in the type of mouth damage shown here. It was on looking at the damage caused that prompted a re-think as to rig mechanics. It's not the hook being ripped out by the rod or the angler but the lead bouncing away out of control doing all the damage.





If it meant using a treble hook to go cat fishing, I think I would stay indoors.

Treble hooks account for a lot of damage to the soft fleshy parts of a catfish's mouth. Repeat capture results in lasting scars & sore open wounds if the hooks are not removed properly.

I use single hooks for live-baiting carp as well as eel. The need to use a treble for cat fishing must become a thing of the past if you practice catch & release.

The catfish will still get caught on rigs using treble hooks, but lasting mouth damage can be avoided by not using them in first instance. Big scars may add to the character of a big fish, but the stress & energy used to repair such damage is unnecessary.

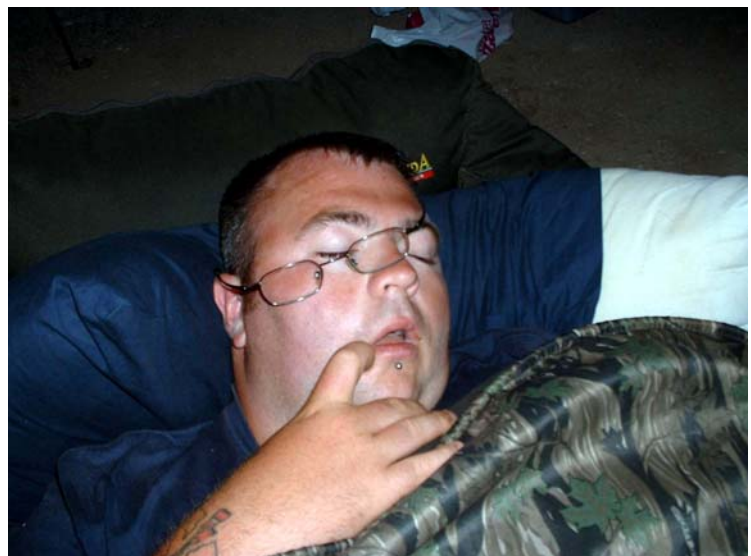
Some damage is caused by cutting braids that are high in breaking strain & abrasion resistance, 80 or 100lb Dacron is all that is required if the fish is played with respect, using soft & supple braids does not necessarily reduce cutting the fish, I avoid thin diameter high breaking strain braids as bleeding cuts & open wounds strike fear & guilt to any damage inflicted.

Always ensure you take a first aid kit fishing, foremost for yourself but secondly for fish care as contents such as Iodine solution & petroleum jelly can help quicken the healing process & reduce the chance of lasting sores or open wounds. You can buy fish care solution from any good tackle shop, for a few pounds you have peace of mind in the fact you care about the fish you are fishing for.

Plenty of rest is the order of the day whether it is in shifts with your fishing party or with the rods wound in & is vital to the success of your fishing trip.

You need to be on top form when laying your traps & in good condition & sporting a smile for your photographs. If you are tired you are more prone to snapping at your friends & your ability to read the river & spot fish movements goes out the window.

Beware of sleeping with your rods out as if caught by the bailiff or local police you will incur a monetary fine.



Catfish usually expend all their energy during the fight in many attempt to shed your hook hold, they can swim as fast backwards in short bursts as they do swimming forwards & initial runs can be in excess of 75 yards. They have no natural predator & fear virtually nothing other than a bigger catfish with a firmer grip.

It is quite often that when you get the catfish up on to the bank that they lye calm & placid, this in effect is a sure sign it is knackered & will only play up by thrashing & snapping if it has been rushed to the bank unnecessarily & still has a bit of fight left saved for the bank or is mistreated on the mat in some way.



The first signs of stress are pictured left when the lower jaws bottom curtain starts to go pink & red in colour.

This is followed by the inside bottom mouth & outer chin becoming blotchy & sore looking with a more noticeable pink & red tint.

The next signs of stress are seen on the outer gill covers & the pectoral fin bulbs. If you start to see these signs it is best to start thinking of returning the fish safely to the margins as the last thing you want is a dead catfish let alone dead personal best on your hands. Most catfish caught do not show signs of stress where as others take offence in being hooked & are red & blotchy from the word go.

Be mindful of sensitive fish & always have the fish out of the water for the least possible amount of time, have both buckets of water & cameras to hand, ensure that every member of the group has little fish care chores to complete that will rotate as you work as a group & play a part in everyone's catch & returns.



If the catfish ever starts to pink & purple up in its flanks its time to say goodbye, by this time no excess air will be in its stomach as you would have burped it up & the fish should be making moves in an attempt to slip your grasp & return home.

If you are unsure of returning fish in the first instance, ensure the head is facing the bank when you are out in the margins as you will be able to recover a distressed fish from under your feet as opposed to see it top up worryingly out of reach.

Retaining catfish by a short stringer during the day is unnecessary unless it is a new world record.

Be prepared for rodeo when entering the water to reclaim your fish. If you obtain its weight & length before putting securing by stringer you can then just photograph the fish in the water as opposed to causing any unnecessary stress by hauling it back up the bank.

Catfish Rodeo



Most stringers (rope used to retain catfish) are put on personal best fish that are caught nearing the hour of midnight.



The catfish are kept in the water until first light for photographing & these fish have a habit during this time of recharging their batteries to the max.



It is best to tire them in the water & on re-gloving the fish, gently rub the top lip running your hand over its nostrils as such & between the whiskers as it has some kind of calming effect & will see your cat soon purring to the bank.



When collecting fish that have been put on stringer you will need to be waist deep in the water, if the fish is anywhere near rocks or dry land they will beat you & themselves up in protest.



Stringers & Rope Rash

When you secure your fish for too long by stringer the catfish develops rope rash. Rope rash looks sore & itchy but is easily avoided by keeping stringer time to a minimum.



The best type of stringer is a 15-meter length rope with a just loop in one end, the loop is passed up through a gill plate between gill raker 1 & 2 with the other end of the rope passing through the loop so it self secures. You need this length of rope in order for the catfish to be sat relatively stress free in a reasonable depth of water.

Use an echo sounder to find suitable mooring spots for sleeping cats as these factors will determine the length of rope required & avoids the catfish getting snagged in any unseen underwater features.

The single loop stringer ensures that if the catfish escapes the tying off point on the bank then the stringer will pull through itself leaving the catfish free from its retaining device. Ropes with series of knots to form a retainer are difficult to pass through gill rakers & cause unnecessary damage, this in turn tethers the fish to the rope & if the fish swims free the stringer stays with the fish.



Accidents happen, the small tear in the pec above was caused by a swivel due to a hook-link that was too short.

If you have a fish that is bleeding always make sure it is returned to the water quickly. Take needle & cotton to sew up any large cuts as well as Iodine & a tub of Vaseline for mouth repairs from hook holds.



Marking fish by cutting half moons out of dorsal fin or sections of tail & pec is a crime in my opinion.

All catfish are unique & each mottle pattern is like a finger print.

Most big cats have distinguishing marks that a true observer & fisherman at heart will recognise again & again.

By process of education, cutting culture I hope will soon be a thing of the past.

Actively promote fish care & safe return as most catfish will out live us twice over & some.