



## CIRCLE HOOK MAGIC

by Jerald Horst

At first glance, to a fisherman who has never used one, a circle hook looks like it is designed NOT to catch fish. It looks like a badly bent hook, ready for discard. But it does catch fish, lots of fish.

While the hook is relatively new to recreational fishermen, except for those specializing in snapper fishing, commercial fishermen have used these hooks for years. Both longline and snapper reel commercial fishermen prize them for their ability to catch fish on unattended gear, their retention of hooked fish and their safety on the deck of a fishing vessel.

While circle hooks do not work well on actively fished artificial lures and plugs, they can be used in almost any presentation that uses live or natural bait. Fishermen using live bait for speckled trout, redfish or trophy largemouth bass find them deadly. They also work extremely well on trotline and set lines for catfish, especially when targeting large fish.

Saltwater bottom fishermen seeking snappers and groupers will find circle hooks to be the most effective hook available. Even offshore trollers using natural baits can use circle hooks. For trolling, it is best to attach the bait to the shank of the hook with a rubber band or waxed string rather than to try to pass the hook through the bait.

The big advantage that circle hooks offer is that fish are almost never deep-hooked. When a fish takes the bait and attempts to swim off, the hook pulls out of the throat and to a corner of the mouth, where the hook rotates and pierces the jaw, usually in the corner. Once the fish is hooked, it finds that it is almost impossible to shake the hook out. Also, fish hooked in the corner of the mouth tend to fight better than deep-hooked fish.

Jaw-hooked fish have a much higher survival rate after release than deep-hooked fish. This is important to trophy fishermen who often release large numbers of smaller fish, and to fishermen who fish on a catch and release basis.

A high survival rate of released fish is critical in fisheries for species under strict management with minimum and/or maximum size limits. Typically, these fish species are classified as overfished or are heavily fished species being intensively managed to prevent overfishing.

Circle hooks offer other advantages. When properly used, catch rates are much higher than with J-shaped hooks. They are safer, with no exposed point to hook a fellow fisherman. Circle hooks are also much less likely to snag bottom or debris. Also, fish with sharp teeth are less likely to cut the line as they are hooked in the corner of the mouth. Less fish are lost and fishermen often can use lighter leaders which may improve catch rates. After the fish is landed, the hook can be removed with a simple twist using needle nose pliers or with a dehooking device.

While commercial fishermen have been using circle hooks for some time, first-time recreational users will need re-education not to set the hook. Jerking the rod in response to a bite will pull the hook from the mouth of the fish nearly every time. The fish must be allowed to hook itself when it swims away. Fishermen who have difficulty breaking the habit of setting the hook may want to try putting the rod in a holder and fishing "dead stick". Another minor problem is that determining the right size circle hook can be difficult because hook sizes currently are not standard among manufacturers. This lack of standardization makes ordering circle hooks from a catalog a little difficult.