



HANDLING YOUR CATCH IN THE FIELD

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Fish and seafoods are among the most perishable of all foods. Unlike many foods that we eat, we may harvest fish and seafoods or we may purchase them alive. There is great diversity in types of fish and seafood. Fish are not handled the same way that you would crabs and crawfish. Consequently, the way we handle these highly perishable foods at the time of capture or purchase will determine their quality at the table. The following are some tips that may help you to handle your catch in the field. This short summary of handling practices contains only major consideration. Contact your local Marine Advisory Agent for any specific questions or concerns.

FISH

For the most part, fish die soon after capture. At a minimum, live fish should be stored on stingers, in live wells or in live baskets to maintain quality. Avoid throwing fish in the bottom of the boat or in buckets or cans. Chilling with ample amounts of ice is the best way to retard deterioration. Place fish in an ice chest with approximately 1 to 2 pounds of ice for each pound of fish. As the ice melts, periodically, drain off water and add more ice if necessary. Melting ice will have a tendency to wash off bacteria if drained, however, if the water is not drained, the fish soaking in the water and the build up of slime may cause the fish to spoil. A big ice chest will be required to handle large fish. Gutting fish will also help to preserve quality. Do not fillet or cut the head or tail off of fish until you return home. The only way that conservation regulatory agencies can determine the species and legal size of fish is by examining the whole fish.

CRABS AND CRAWFISH

Live crabs and crawfish must be kept under conditions that will keep them alive until cooking. Upon death, they will decompose extremely rapidly. Always discard dead crabs and crawfish prior to cooking. The best way to prolong the life of these shellfish is to keep them cool, moist and with some fresh air. Under ideal conditions, crabs and crawfish may be kept alive for several days out of water. Never place them in closed containers full of water, such as an ice chest, as they will quickly suffocate and die. Crawfish are usually purchased in onion sacks and these are excellent for maintaining them alive. Live crabs are generally stored in wooden crates, covered with a damp burlap sack. Never place crabs or crawfish directly in the sun, but place them in a cool shaded area. Ice placed on top of the sack will help to cool the shellfish and the dripping melt water will keep them moist. Allow for some air circulation. Although, the shellfish are out of water, the internal gills are kept wet inside the shell but must have fresh air. Prior to cooking, always carefully examine the crawfish or crabs to be sure they are alive and thoroughly wash them to remove unwanted debris. Take care to avoid cross contamination between the live and cooked shellfish. For example, never placed cooked crawfish or crabs back into the same container in which the live shellfish were stored as this may cause a serious illness.

OYSTERS

The regulations for harvesting and consuming oysters are very strict for your safety. Never harvest oysters without following all rules and regulations required by state and federal agencies. To do so is a serious violation of law even if it is for your own use. Harvesting waters must be routinely evaluated and approved by the state. Most oyster bottoms are leased by seafood businesses. However, there are public harvesting areas but the rules for harvesting from these areas must be carefully followed. The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries can provide this information to you. Most of Louisiana marine waters are closed to oyster harvesting for public health reasons. Consuming oysters from a closed area can result in serious illness. Always buy oyster from a reputable dealer. When purchasing oysters by the sack, it is important that the harvesting tag be attached to the sack. This tag indicates the harvester, the date and the location of harvest. By law, all legally harvested oysters must have the oyster tag attached to the sack. Also for safety reasons, sacks of oysters should be cooled shortly after harvesting by the commercial harvester and they should be thoroughly cooled at the time of purchase. Never purchase a sack of live oysters unless you are able to keep them cool to at least 45°F. The consumption of raw oysters should be avoided by certain individuals for health reasons. Read all warning labels and check with your physician if you are unsure if you are at risk.

SHRIMP

Like fish, shrimp die quickly after harvesting and must be iced down quickly in an ice chest. As a general rule, use 1 to 2 pounds of ice for each pound of shrimp to be iced. The ice and shrimp should be thoroughly mixed to insure quick and adequate chilling. As the ice melts, water should be periodically drained off. Shrimp will spoil quickly if allowed to set in undrained water. As the ice melts, it should be replaced with new ice.