

**DON STAZICKER**

**F**ew fishermen know how hard they can pull with their tackle before it will break, yet knowing that safe pull is one of the most important parts of playing a fish". Lee Wulff 1986

Scientific studies show that properly practised, catch-and-release results in low mortality in returned fish. The mortality rate is influenced by a number of factors including

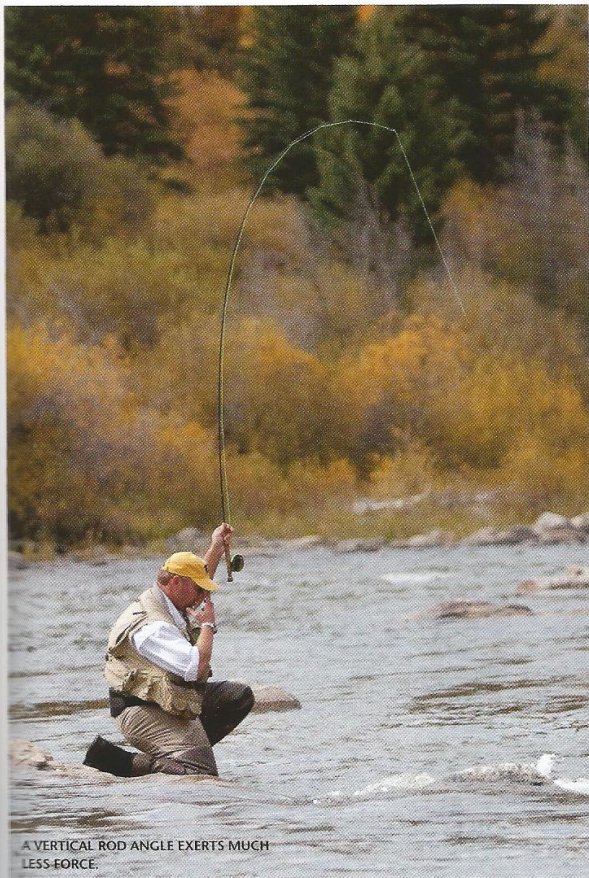
angling method, water temperature, exposure to air and stress related to angling duration that includes both the fight and the recovery periods. The Cooke Fish Ecology Lab of Carlton University, Canada, is a leader in research into the effects of catch-and-release both in terms of fish mortality and in non-lethal effects on growth, reproduction and behaviour. They recommend:

*Anglers should attempt to land fish as rapidly as possible to minimize the duration of exercise*

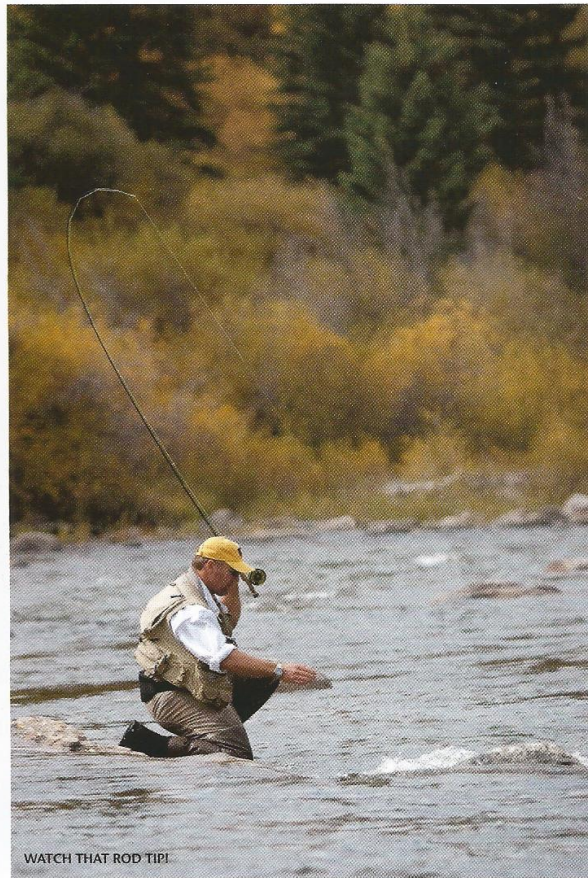
*and the concomitant physiological disturbance. Anglers should choose optimal equipment matched to the size of fish that are expected to be encountered. Efforts to intentionally prolong the angling event through the use of light lines or rods should be dissuaded.*

The longer we fight our fish the greater the physiological stress the fish will experience; this can result in fish which are played to exhaustion and which require either very prolonged recovery periods before release or





A VERTICAL ROD ANGLE EXERTS MUCH LESS FORCE.



WATCH THAT ROD TIP!

that do not recover. We should aim to land our trout as rapidly as possible. When fly-fishing for trout, how might we tailor our tackle and fish fighting methods to achieve this goal?

Fly-fishing is a balance between tackle that is heavy enough to land fish quickly and yet light enough to delicately deliver the fly in order to deceive the trout. It is now possible to obtain fly leader material down to less than 1lb breaking strain and fine wire hooks that are 4X fine. While these products make for a high floating, delicately presented dry fly they may prolong the time needed to land sizeable fish to an unacceptable degree. Even if you do not break on the strike, which with a fish of any size on fine leaders is quite likely, then the lack of strength of leader and hook wire will prevent you taking the fight to the fish in an efficient manner. If you then use a very light rod to protect these weak links, your control over hooked fish will be further reduced.

I fish the Derbyshire Wye, a river that produces wild browns and rainbows to 3lb and

beyond. In the summer it can be a small fly river and I routinely use dries and nymphs down to size 24. I use hooks that are at least 1X stout such as the Tiemco 100SP BL, I tie them to leaders which are very rarely less than 6X, which in low diameter nylon equates to 3.5 pound breaking strain. For flies in the 14-20 range I fish 5X 4.75lb nylon. Leaders of this strength mean that trout of up to 1lb can

**“Think of fighting fish in terms of the martial arts where it is often better to go with the opponent rather than oppose their motion.”**

be brought to the net in about 30 seconds.

I fish these leaders and flies with a nine foot four weight carbon fibre rod.

My largest wild brown trout on a dry fly was caught on the Oreti, a big fast river in New Zealand, using a 5X leader. It came to the net in two-and-a-quarter minutes and weighed 8.5lb. Obviously the pressure that can be applied using balanced tackle is far greater than most anglers realise.

Following the take, there are several points

at which the fight may be shortened. The fish can be disorientated by the strike and if its head is kept up it can often be prevented from ever getting into a position to run away from you; often a small to medium-sized trout can be fought on the surface like this and may be netted quickly. If the fish runs I prefer it to be upstream of me so it will be fighting the current as well as the rod; should the fish get

below me I will walk downstream to re-establish the upstream relationship.

A fish hanging in the current below you

is not expending any energy; it is resting and you are helping it to do so. If you can't get below the fish by moving yourself then try to avoid pulling it back upstream against the flow as a high percentage of hook holds fail at this point. Instead, flip the rod into a side strain position to pull the fish out of the main current and into the quieter marginal flow. If the fish is upstream you want it to be in the fastest flow, if downstream in the slowest.



## CATCH AND RELEASE FISHING

Think of fighting fish in terms of the martial arts where it is often better to go with the opponent rather than oppose their motion. If the fish is pulling hard against side strain it can be very effective to flip the rod to the opposite side and apply strain from the direction in which the fish is pulling, the result of this is to cause the fish to overcompensate and it will often turn through 180 degrees and swim towards you. If this type of move is performed several times the fish often becomes very disorientated and can be landed quickly.

The angle of the rod relative to the line has a huge effect on the force experienced by the fish. When the rod points directly down the line at zero degrees, there is no cushioning effect from the rod and break-off is very likely. Holding the rod vertical at 90 degrees, we have the worst position for leverage and cannot apply much force to the fish. Tipping the rod back beyond 90 degrees, leverage starts to improve but at the expense of a very small radius bend in the tip section of the rod; tip breakage becomes more likely with increasing the angle beyond 90 degrees.

The optimum angle for cushioning the line and applying force efficiently to the fish must lie between 0 and 90 degrees, but where? Somewhere between 30 and 45 degrees will allow the angler to exert a considerable force on the fish while protecting the line. This position brings the powerful butt section into play and by shortening the effective length of the rod makes for a more efficient lever which can apply more force to the fish. This is probably a much flatter position than many anglers of the "keep the tip up" school would consider safe.

Look at the photos of Trapper Rudd fishing on the Blue River

in Colorado. The rainbow trout was hooked upstream nymphing but turned and shot down below him; Trapper couldn't follow it due to the depth of the water and so he applied side strain to bring the fish into the slack pocket behind the rock on which he was standing. Having reduced the flow affecting the fish he was able to use a fairly flat rod angle to bring the butt section of the rod into play and apply plenty of force to the trout. In the second picture, as the fish comes closer, the rod angle is becoming more vertical and the force is coming more from the middle and tip sections, the trout is experiencing less force in this position. In the final picture with the fish close at hand it is only the tip of



the rod that is working; in this rod position the fish experiences very little pressure and should it lunge away the rod tip may snap.

How could this last situation be improved? Firstly get a mate or guide to land your fish. If they stand some distance away from you while you guide the trout to them you need never use these vertical rod angles and will be in a much better position to pressure the fish. In the absence of a handy helper use a soft catch and release net; the extra length of the net allows you to land the fish at a greater distance, again avoiding the extreme vertical

**"An angler can take special pride if, whenever he unhooks a fish to release it, it swims away strongly on its own". Lee Wulff 1986**

rod angle. I definitely land large fish much faster with a net than by hand. I don't tend to squeeze them and I can keep them in the water if intending to take a picture. Holding the trout belly-up while in the net avoids the fish struggling. I am referring here to knotless nets with very fine mesh of either soft cotton or smooth coated nylon. These nets may be obtained with built-in scales or measuring markings enabling quick recording of fish size.

If you intend to land a trout by hand avoid the cocked wrist position in the third picture. Turn side on to the fish and push your rod out to the rear increasing the distance between the fish and the butt of the rod to allow a

shallower rod angle. I find this works best if I rotate the rod handle so the rings are facing away from the fish.

Having landed your fish keep it in the water as much as possible, unhook gently with wet hands and make sure it has recovered sufficiently before release. I don't remove the hook, either by hand or by using a release tool, without supporting the fish with my other hand, as I feel if you drop it into the water it will be gone before you can be sure it has fully recovered. I prefer to hold the fish gently facing upstream until it starts to struggle to be free; this can often be as long as it has taken to land the trout.

In conclusion, fish with tackle that will let you control the largest fish you expect to catch, use flatter rod angles and above all take the fight to the fish - don't just stand there and pull in the opposite direction all the time. Remember, you are going to put it back anyway, so don't be afraid that by applying a bit more force the fish will get off, you will find a more positive fish fighting strategy will bring more fish to the net.

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