

The Tail Wags the

By Dr. Chugey Sepulveda,



Another incredible season of springtime thresher shark fishing is underway in Southern California, with private boaters scoring consistently on these large pelagics. The common thresher shark seems to have filled a void in the otherwise quiet near-shore fishing action, allowing anglers to dust off their trollers in early spring and hear the drags sing within a few miles of the harbor. Recreational fishing for thresher sharks has reached an all time high,

That Rod

Scott Aalbers and Craig Heberer
Photos by Phil Zerofski



Even though a tail-hooked thresher may look exhausted or lifeless when you get it boatside, they can often be successfully released.



with a growing number of anglers successfully targeting these intriguing giants. As we are now in the midst of the sixth consecutive season of excellent springtime thresher fishing, Southern California appears to be one of the most productive thresher fisheries in the world.

Although the thresher fishery is just emerging on the recreational scene, it has an extensive commercial history, dating back to 1977. The commercial fishery first emerged as an experimental gear type (drift gillnet) used by only a few smaller vessels. The fishing for thresher sharks and swordfish gained commercial interest rapidly as markets expanded and the fishing was good. The fleet size rapidly grew to over 251 permits by the mid 1980s, when the California Department of Fish and Game closed the fishery to new applicants. In 1982 the landings for the common thresher peaked with approximately 1,000 metric tons landed, primarily by the drift gillnet fleet.

It did not take long before the fishery showed the telltale signs of being over-fished (i.e, catch rate decline and

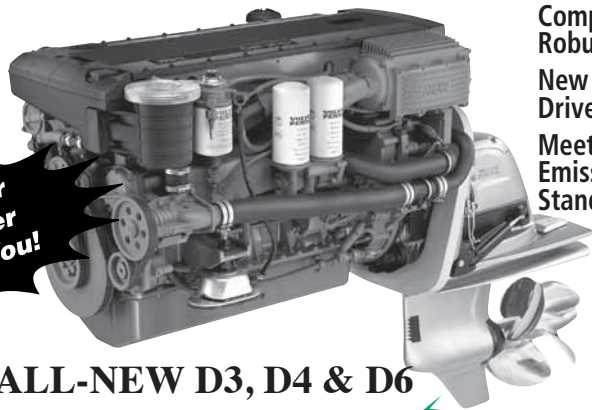


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Male threshers can be easily identified by their two claspers.

decline in fish size). Managers began implementing a series of time and area closures to protect the thresher resource as well as other species such as sea turtles and marine mammals. One of the most stringent regulations on the drift gillnet fleet was the closure of the inner coastal waters out to 75 nm in 1990. This closure was intended to reduce the take of pregnant females during the pupping season and likely was the single most important factor in the rebuilding of the thresher shark resource.

Several factors have led to a very slow recovery for the thresher shark in California waters. First off, female threshers take approximately five to eight years to reach sexual maturity and then must

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carry their young for an additional nine months. The pups are live-born at a very large size (approximately four feet in length and eight to 15 pounds), and females usually give birth to only four per litter. The reproductive biology of thresher sharks makes them highly vulnerable to over fishing. Equally alarming is that limited information exists with regard to the extent that this highly migratory resource is exploited by other countries. In other words, we do not have a good record of the landings that take place outside of California. Thus, rebuilding an over-fished population, even in the best-case scenario of zero fishing mortality, takes decades. The primary objective of this piece is to provide anglers



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Watch that tail! Besides swimming, a thresher's tail is used to stun its prey (or the occasional unwary fisherman).



with some perspective to assist in keeping this stock healthy, so that we can all enjoy a viable resource for years to come.

TIPS

- First, heavy tackle is mandatory when trolling for thresher sharks since you may hook into an unstoppable freight train at any time. This means 80-pound monofilament with backing, as a large tail-hooked shark can strip off 300 yards in minutes. We do not know whether sharks that trail 500 yards of mono and a lead headed lure live or die. My opinion is that they probably don't make it, especially if the terminal tackle is stainless and imbedded in the upper portion of the tail, as these sharks use this fin for both swimming and prey capture. Because thresher sharks, like most pelagic species, must swim forward to breath (obligate ram-ventilators), catching these sharks by the tail limits water flow over the gills and can liter-

ally suffocate the shark. During our thresher shark tagging studies, over 95 percent of the troll-caught threshers were hooked by the tail. We have found that the bottom line with respect to survivability in a tail-hooked thresher is to reduce fight time. A good fighting harness can really assist to shorten fight times, as they allow the angler to really increase the pressure on the fish. Also, if a large tail-hooked shark remains at depth directly below the boat, then it may be necessary to hand-line the shark to the surface. All of these practices require heavy gear (80-pound minimum).

- When fighting a tail-hooked thresher, do not fight the fish from a straight up-and-down position. This will kill your back and the shark as well. Use the boat to your advantage, and get an angle on the fish. If you drive away from the fish, you will plane the fish to the surface and simultaneously allow him to breath. When the shark

is at the surface, speed up and recover line. In a typical fight, this will happen on the order of five or so times. Most likely, every time the boat gets close to the fish, it will initiate another run from the shark, which will eventually lead to the quick exhaustion of the shark, and result in a shorter fight time.

- When at the boat an exhausted thresher often looks dead, but most of the time it is not. Get prepared beforehand. Tie a small bronze barbless hook onto a short pole or broomstick and hook the animal by the base of the dorsal fin or even the base of the pectoral fin. Slowly creep in and out of gear and basically force water through the sharks gills (this is the same procedure that everyone advocates for the release of billfish). Simply "walk" the animal for a minute or two. For severely exhausted fish, this can take up to 15 minutes but should

result in some body movement. Once you feel even slight kicking, unhook the shark and let it go.

- If possible, the hooking of the threshers by the mouth is best, as it gives the angler a great fight (with leaps out of the water common), and it allows the shark to breath as he struggles on the line. So, the next obvious question is: how do you do this? Well, try trolling with no hooks, loose drags and your drop-back ready. Once you get a strike, slowly reel the trolled lure closer to the boat, drop a dead bait or a chunk back and stop the boat. This technique usually works really well, but be patient, and wait out a bite for up to 15 minutes. Again, if you intend on releasing the fish, large stainless "J" hooks are not a good idea!

- Minimize the mortality of large pregnant females! I cannot stress how



Data collected from satellite tagging allows for a greater understanding of thresher migratory patterns.

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important this is, as it caused the decline in the fishery in the early 1980s and certainly has the capacity to do it again. Avoid taking large females in the spring, as there is a very good chance that she will be carrying pups. In my opinion, the removal of male sharks is always strategically better than the removal of a female, especially a large mature female. The rationale for this is that males mature at a slightly earlier age than females and because males can potentially mate with more than one female. So the next question is: how do I know if it is a male? At approximately three quarters the way back on the underside of the shark you will observe two anal fins. On the midline, between these two fins males have two cartilaginous extensions called claspers. These are the reproductive organs of the male.

Fishing for threshers can be an exhilarating experience that we hope can be enjoyed for generations to come; however we need to realize that this is a very fragile resource that we all share.

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By "walking" the thresher alongside as the boat travels at slow speed, chances for a successful release are increased.

We have the tendency to point the finger at commercial interests for the degradation of fisheries worldwide. However, in California it seems that we don't realize that our recreational fleet is just that – a fleet! With an increasing number of well-informed

private boaters on the water and the advent of timely information sharing via fishing Websites, the harvest potential of the recreational fleet has become a significant factor that can no longer be overlooked in fisheries management.

“Taking the initiative and limiting harvest – maybe limiting the take to one shark per boat – should allow all of us to enjoy the benefits of this resource for generations to come.”

Although the bag limit for this species is two sharks per person per day, we want to remind anglers that these regulations were implemented at a time when the recreational fleet was much smaller and the recreational shark take was only a small fraction of what it is today. Taking the initiative and limiting harvest – maybe limiting the take to one shark per boat – should allow all of us to enjoy the benefits of this resource for generations to come. These are a few tips that, we hope, can be used to promote the sustainable future of this amazing resource.

This article is written by Dr. Chugey Sepulveda and Scott Aalbers of the Pflieger Institute of Environmental Research (PIER) in Oceanside, California (www.pier.org) and Craig Heberer, NMFS lead biologist for the US West Coast HMS Fisheries Management Plan. You can reach Craig at (760) 431-9440, ext. 303, or via email at craig.heberer@noaa.gov. Further information on the HMS FMP can be found on NMFS' Website at http://swr.nmfs.noaa.gov/. PIER is a non-profit 501(c)3 research institute dedicated to research and the sustainable management of the marine environment. Special thanks are offered to Mr. Thomas Pflieger and the George T. Pflieger Foundation and the National Science Foundation (IOB-0617384).



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