

Don't Underestimate the Reward

Tagging or “marking” fish is a common tool used by biologists to assess fish populations. The recovery of a tagged fish can help determine things like movement and migratory patterns, growth rates, habitat utilization and general population dynamics.

The specifics of a tagging study, tag types, species being tagged, often vary from project to project, depending on the research goals. Some projects utilize tags such as satellite transmitters, acoustic tags, or Passive Integrated Transponder (PIT) tags, all of which require the use of additional specialized equipment to identify and track the animal. Many tagging studies also use some type of external tag, typically made of a brightly colored plastic-like substance, that allow the tracking of the animal over a much longer period of time. Because an external tag is visible on the animal, researchers rely on the cooperation of the general public to report the recovery of the tag. A reward, in the form of money or a promotional item such as a hat or t-shirt, is usually associated with the tag as an incentive for reporting.

A number of studies have been done on tag reporting rates or the percent of tags recovered that actually are reported by anglers. One such study estimated that less than fifty percent of tags encountered by recreational anglers are reported. It's no surprise that tags which offer a monetary reward are more likely to be reported than those that don't. There is also the assumption that the higher the reward the more likely the return. There are certainly instances where anglers just don't notice the tag. Sometimes after only a few months a tag can become encrusted with growth to the point that it no longer resembles a tag, but looks more like a parasite trailing off the fish.

So why don't anglers report tags? Given the current climate within the recreational angling community towards fisheries management, it's possible that some people feel the information from the recapture of a tagged fish will be used against them. The fact is that data obtained from tagging and recaptures is only a tiny piece of the puzzle when it comes to assessing a fishery. The more pieces of the puzzle we have, the better the understanding, which ultimately gives fisheries managers the ability to make more informed decisions. Anglers should recognize that by reporting the recovery of a tagged fish they are actually contributing to the conservation and management of “our” fisheries.

Furthermore, anglers are encouraged to release a tagged fish with the tag still intact, as this provides the opportunity for researchers to document additional data points. I have administered a tagging project for over twelve years, and it has been my experience that many anglers' who report the capture of a tagged fish are more interested in the history of the fish than the actual reward. At first this came as a surprise, but after hearing the reasoning from one angler it became apparent. The more he understood his prey, the more successful he was at catching it. The feedback he received, which detailed the initial tag event, including where the fish was originally tagged, clued him into other locations where the fish might be found during certain times of the year. If you catch a fish with a tag, consider taking a few minutes to report your catch. The reward may turn out to be much more than what you expected.