Return ‘Em Right

Best Release Practices Manual

Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission

Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council’s Science & Statistical Committee

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Outline

- The Problem
- Initial Efforts & Recommendations
- Background & Support
- Best Practices Workshop
- Manual Contents & Highlights
- Future Use

The Problem

Discard mortality in the Gulf

- Discard mortality is a significant issue in the Gulf
- Millions of reef fish are caught and discarded annually, with high mortality rates
- Key causes: barotrauma, improper handling, and predation
- Consequences: economic and conservation

Why it's matters?

- Rising fishing pressure = rising regulatory discards
- New findings and tools to improve release survival

Initial Efforts

2019 Release Mortality Symposium

- Action plan to reduce discard mortality from rec fishing efforts
- Stakeholder-driven process (scientists, managers, rec and commercial anglers)
- Key Recommendations:
  - Not only barotrauma, release mortality involves many factors requiring flexible solutions
  - Best practices by fleet:
    - ***Private anglers*** need education on handling and release strategies
    - ***Charter captains*** prioritize minimizing fight time and using descending devices when feasible
    - ***Headboats*** mostly prefer venting, so focus on proper technique

Symposium Recommendations

- Anglers allowed the flexibility to choose which mitigation technique to use
- Prepare anglers to make the best decisions in different scenarios
- Consistent monitoring programs: methods and data standards
- Improve existing surveys
- Prioritize data gaps: discards, predation, human dimensions
- Consistent messaging from a central, non-agency voice

Background & Supporting Efforts

Return Em' Right

- DWH Oil Spill Settlement funding
- Provides training and tools for best release practices
- Monitoring and evaluation

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Building on Existing Programs

- Pacific Coast
- South Atlantic – Fish Smart (2017)
- Gulf partners – state agencies and NGO's
- FL Sea Grant and University of FL (2014-16)

Best Practices Workshop

- **Purpose:** Develop a set of standard best release practices informed by science and input from recreational anglers to increase release survival. Recommendations developed into a manual for outreach.
- **Panelists:** 18 anglers, managers, scientists, and 27 others interested parties.

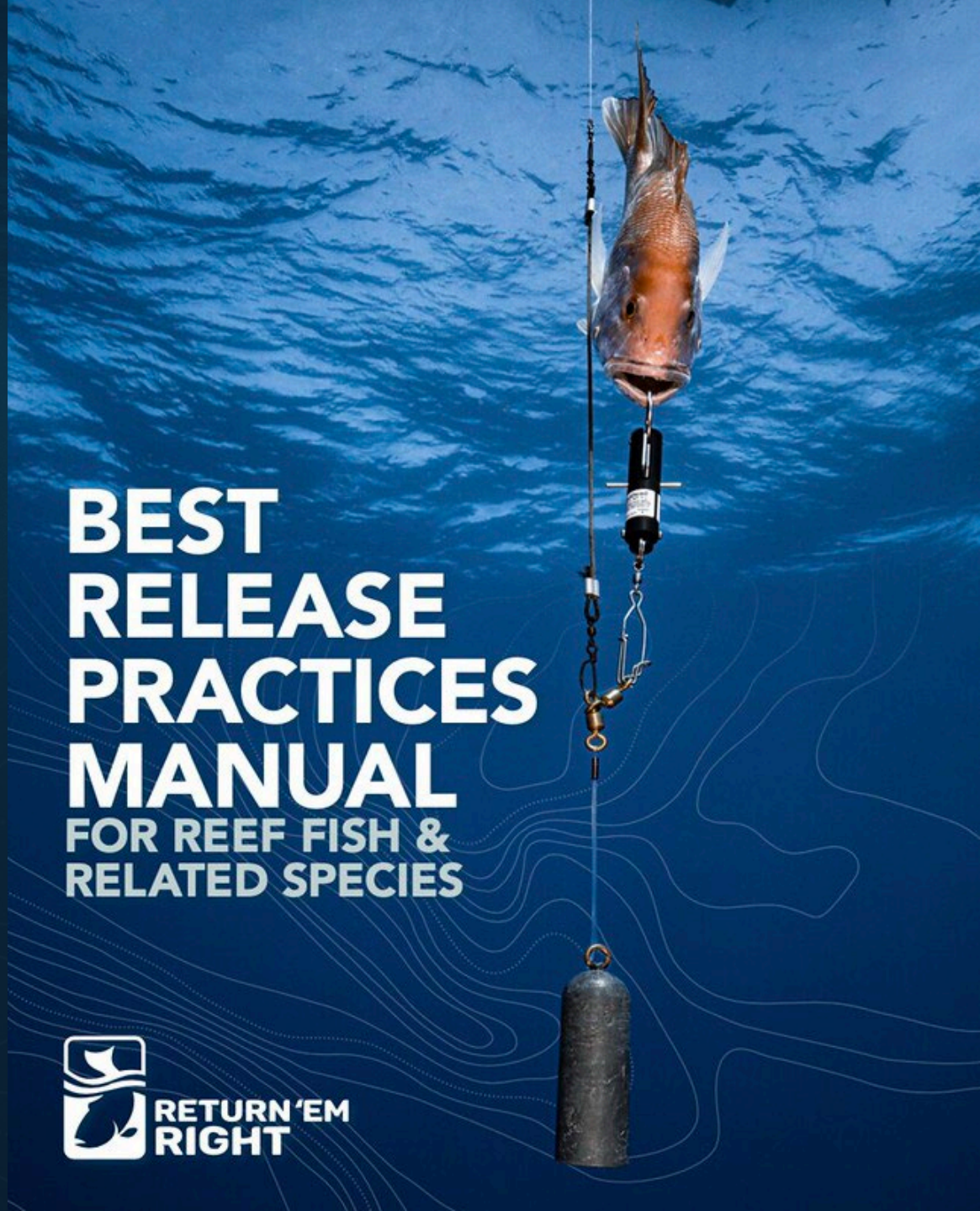
Workshop Goals

- Determine the major decision points anglers are likely to encounter during an offshore fishing trip.
- Determine actions anglers can take to improve a fish's chance of survival upon release
- Produce a manual with recommendations
- Living document adapting to new findings and research

Manual Contents

Format & Organization:

- Preparing for a fishing trip
- Choosing a fishing location
- Fighting fish
- Handling & releasing fish
- Dealing with predators
- Wrapping up a trip



Preparing for a Trip

Generally:

- Define and set expectations
- Know and understand regulations
- Ensure proper gear and training
- Know your target spp. and have a plan for non-target spp.

For-hire:

- Prepare and educate guests/clients
- Providing novices with additional assistance
- Train captains and first mates

Choosing a Location

- Fish shallow waters first
- Things to consider:
  - Target species
  - Duration of trip
  - Depth of fishing
  - Presence of predators
  - Season and water temperature
- Relocate if:
  - Too many require release
  - Predators present
  - Excessive barotrauma

Fighting Fish

Generally:

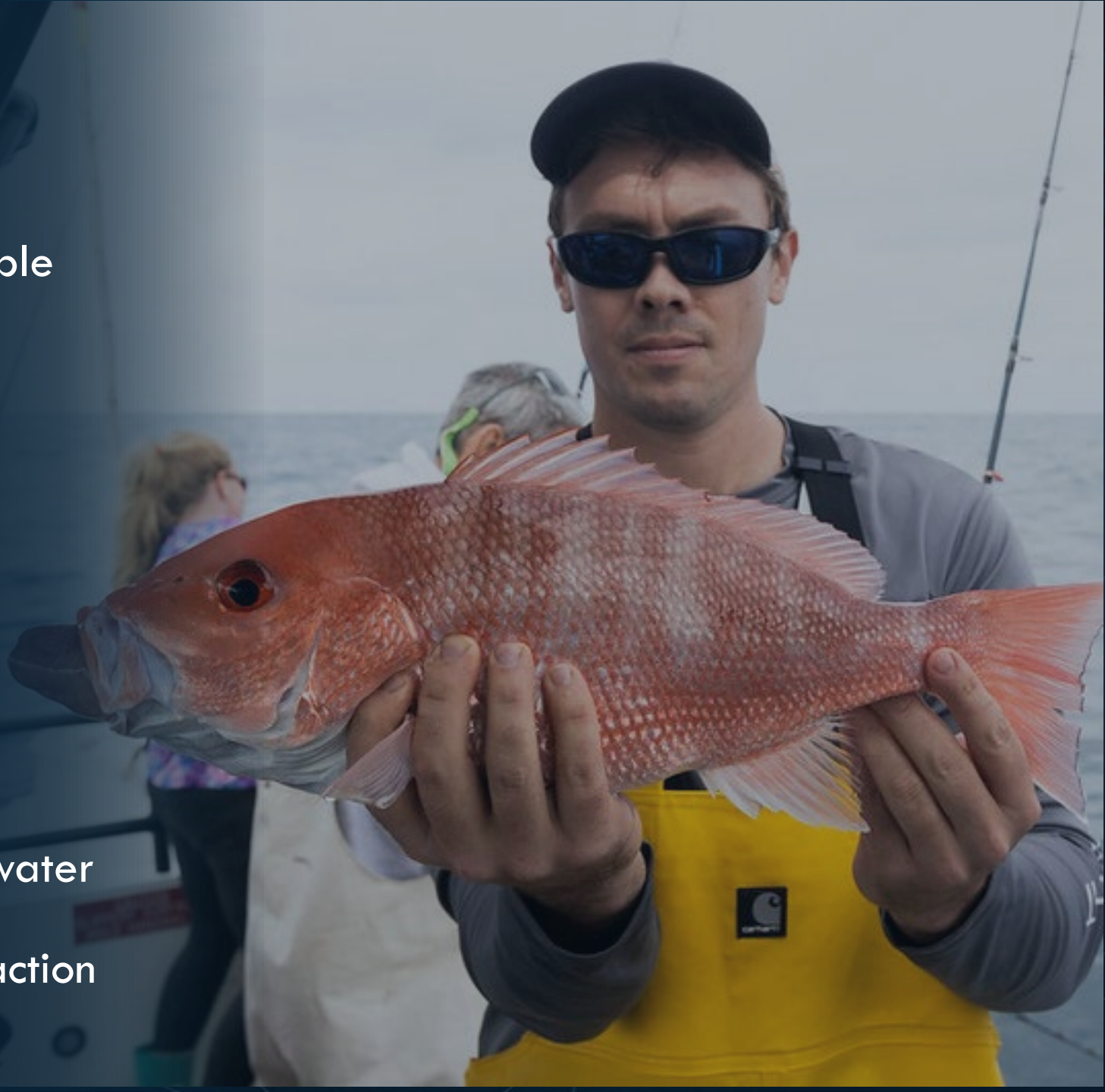
- Use single-hook rigs
- Do not fish from a rod holder
- Plan for a fast fight
- Identify the catch asap to determine its fate

For-hire:

- Avoid entanglements that could prolong fight time
- Provide simple instructions to guests/clients
- Communicate effectively with crew

Handling & Release

- Identify your catch as soon as possible
- Determine harvest or release
- Know signs of barotrauma
- How to properly vent & descend
- Different types of devices
- How to hold the fish
- Minimize handling and time out of water
- Bottom line: if fish need help, take action



Dealing with Predators

Generally:

- Reel fish up quickly
- Relocate if frequent encounters
- Incorporate deterrents

Species-specific:

- Goliath grouper – avoid reefs with large numbers
- Dolphin – relocate

Wrapping Up a Trip

- Clean and maintain your gear
- Note things you needed
- Report catch & discards accurately
- Adopt the best practices that work for you
- Take responsibility

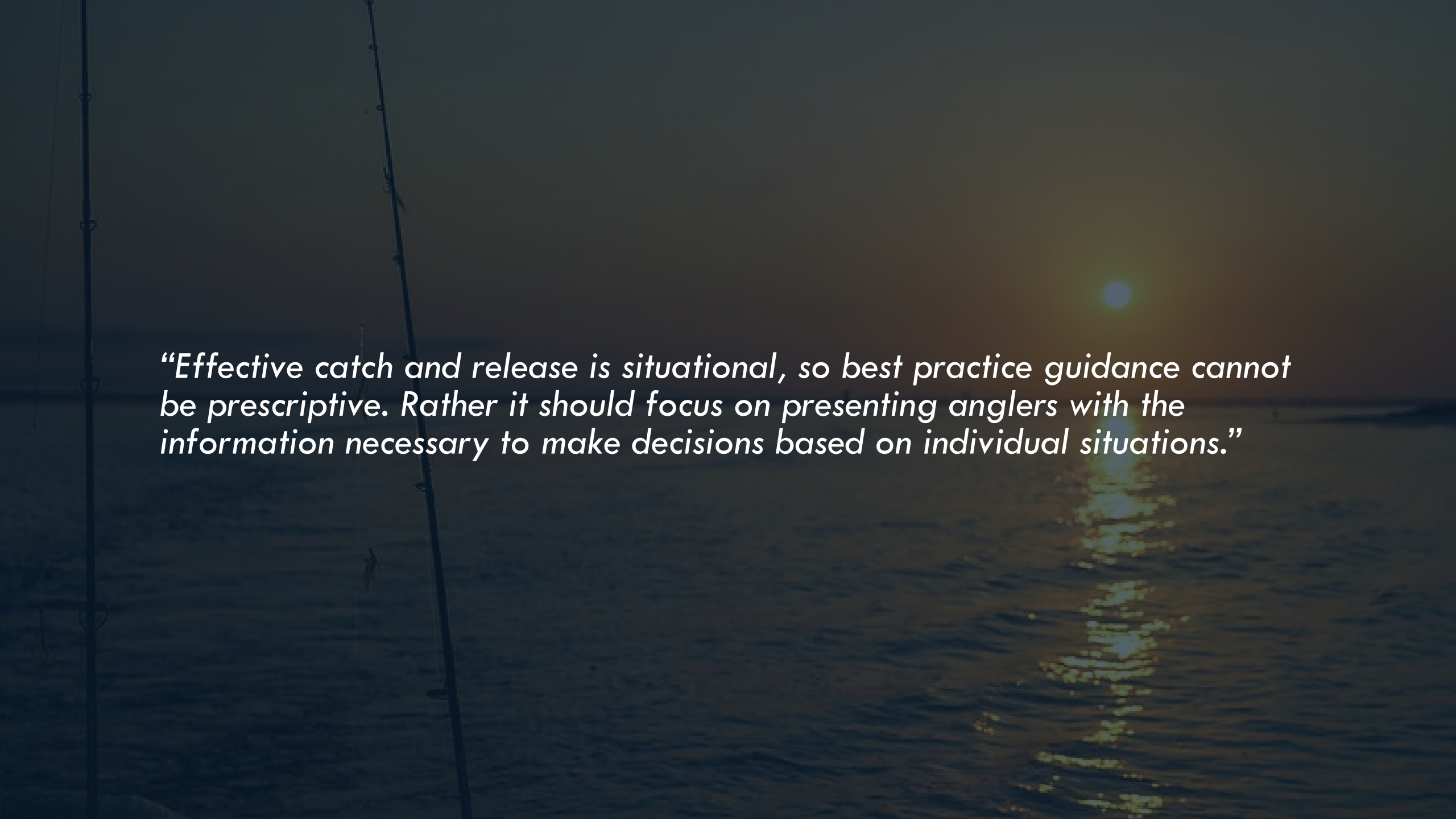
Future Use – Living Document

Ongoing Relevance & Updates

- Updated as new research emerges
- Continues as a central resource for education & management

Long-Term Goals

- Encourage widespread adoption of best practices
- Influence policy and future research
- Consistent Gulf-wide messaging



“Effective catch and release is situational, so best practice guidance cannot be prescriptive. Rather it should focus on presenting anglers with the information necessary to make decisions based on individual situations.”