



CONSERVATION IN ACTION

Freshwater Turtles Meet Fishing Line and Hooks

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Photographs by the author except where noted.

The negative impact of sport fishing on aquatic reptile populations is something not often considered, nor can we put an estimate on the number of freshwater turtles that die of entanglement in discarded fishing line or as a result of an ingested fishhook left untreated. The sad part is that this type of suffering is preventable.

This year alone at the Hobbitstee Wildlife Refuge, the rehab facility that I manage, we received two Eastern

Snapping Turtles (*Chelydra serpentina*) that had been found out of water and were too debilitated to escape or even react to humans (Figs. 1 & 2). X-rays revealed that these turtles had swallowed fishhooks, had been unable to eat, and were slowly wasting away.

As much as a year might pass, but eventually a swallowed fishhook will negatively impact the health and wellbeing of a turtle. I encourage all fishermen to take responsibility for any



Fig. 1. An Eastern Snapping Turtle (*Chelydra serpentina*) that had been found out of water and was too debilitated to escape or even react to humans. An X-ray (insert) clearly showed that it had swallowed a fishhook. The turtle is recovering from surgery at the Hobbitstee Wildlife Refuge. X-ray courtesy of the Haldimand Animal Hospital in Cayuga, Ontario.

turtle they hook and not simply cut the line. The hook needs to be removed.

Handling turtles, especially Snapping Turtles, can be an issue and requires caution. I would not recommend removing

a hook from a Snapping Turtle's mouth without anesthesia. In such instances, the best strategy is to contain the turtle in something like a plastic tote (with air holes and no water) and transport it to your local wildlife rehab facility.



Fig. 2. The fishing line is an obvious clue that this Eastern Snapping Turtle (*Chelydra serpentina*) had likely swallowed a fishhook — which an X-ray (insert) subsequently confirmed. The turtle was released after the hook was surgically removed by Drs. Jim and Kate Sweetman at the Downtown Veterinary Hospital in Windsor, Ontario.



Fig. 3. A Midland Painted Turtle (*Chrysemys picta marginata*) that fell victim to a fishhook. The turtle was released after the hook was removed.

Never pick up a turtle by its tail, which can damage the turtle's spine. The safest method for both turtle and human is to pick up larger turtles with one hand underneath the turtle's back end (much like you would pick up a tray of drinks) while placing your other hand on top of the tail to keep it balanced. Some people hold the back of the carapace (top shell) to pick up a large turtle, but I find them difficult to grip that way.

Whatever you do, your hands should not be above and in front of a Snapping Turtle's hindlegs. Their necks are long enough to reach that far and they are lightning fast — they are called Snapping Turtles for a reason. Also, be aware that the nails on their feet can be sharp and that they will try to scratch you as well.

Once a turtle is safely contained, you can contact the local animal control office, the SPCA, or Humane Society. They should be able to recommend a local wildlife rehabilitator who is able to remove the fishhook. The sooner the fishhook can be removed, the better the outcome for the turtle (Fig. 3).

Entanglement in fishing line can be just as deadly as swallowing a fishhook (Fig. 4). Although examples of freshwater turtles meeting such a fate are rare, accounts of marine turtles and other wildlife trapped in discarded line and nets abound (e.g., http://www.fpir.noaa.gov/PRD/prd_fishing_



Fig. 4. A Spiny Softshell (*Apalone spinifera*) and a Painted Turtle (*Chrysemys picta*) basking on a log in Nebraska. Notice the fishing line wrapped around the log. Entanglement in fishing line can be just as deadly as swallowing a fishhook. Photograph by Richard A. Sajdak.

around_sea_turtles.html and <https://www.seewinter.com/fishing-gear-tips-to-protect-sea-turtles/>). Whenever possible, anglers should retrieve and safely discard used fishing line. Many U.S. coastal states have implemented programs that recycle discarded fishing line (e.g., <http://mrrp.myfwc.com/>

[media/1529/Resources.pdf](http://mrrp.myfwc.com/media/1529/Resources.pdf)). We strongly recommend that inland provinces and states institute similar policies. Anglers and outdoor enthusiasts have a considerable interest in protecting natural environments and are likely to support such measures.