

# Shark Fishing

By (Mako)Mike Plaia (Originally Published in On The Water Magazine)

Most of you reading this know the basics of the sharking game. Rods and reels that can stand up to 15 to 20 pounds of drag, gimbaled belts, harnesses, etc. Let's talk about some of the finer points.

## Hooks

Personally, the number one hook in my arsenal is the Mustad 7699. It's generally acknowledged to be the best hook for sharks. Some guys have begun to experiment with circle hooks, and that's fine when you are surrounded by blue dogs. At times like that, just about any hook will do. I have a big box of 8/0 bluefish hooks that have been on the boat forever, and that's what I use when the blue dogs are thick. But I won't use anything other than a 7699, unless I am hand feeding the fish. I just know that the moment a cheap hook goes out of sight, Mr. Mako is going to eat it and that thin piece of wire isn't going to make the grade.

Leaders There has been lots of talk recently on the Internet discussion boards about shark leaders. For years we just used a 10- or 12- foot piece of piano wire with a hook haywired on one end and a loop on the other. They caught plenty of fish and will still catch fish today. The problem with long lengths of piano wire is that they tend to kink. And once the wire kinks, you have a weak spot that will eventually fail. To address this problem, we moved to a leader system that consists of about ten feet of stranded cable, with a loop crimped on one end and a 500-pound-test "crane" type barrel swivel crimped to the other end. The system is completed by using a haywire twist to attach about 5 feet of piano wire to the swivel and the hook on the other end. There are several advantages to this type of leader. For one, when the inevitable blue shark takes the bait, you can cut it off and just add another hook to the solid wire. The short section of wire won't kink, and even if the blue shark does its famous roll up the leader, only the solid section has to be straightened out. Secondly, and maybe more importantly, the barrel swivel way down the leader gives the wire man something to hold onto as he tries to hold the fish next to the boat for either a gaff shot or to cut it loose. It's amazing how much extra holding power you can apply just by using that swivel to gain some added traction.

Recently, a number of anglers have moved to a similar setup by substituting a heavy length of monofilament line for the stranded cable. Personally, I don't like that setup. If a shark gets into a position where it is rubbing up against the mono, its rough skin will eventually cause the mono to fail.

It's probably not a big consideration when all that's around are blue sharks. But if you're lucky enough to hook a good-sized mako or thresher, especially a thresher with its outsized tail, the odds of the shark rubbing up against the monofilament are pretty good. I've seen plenty of makos come up tail wrapped in the cable we use. If that had been mono instead of cable, I would wager that we would have lost those fish.

Another popular alternative is to use the cable and simply crimp the hook directly onto the cable. This is another accident waiting to happen. Have you ever watched a small mako at boatside and paid attention to what it was doing? Every mako that I have ever seen will constantly open and close its jaws, biting down on that piece of wire that is causing all its torment. With cable in its mouth the fish will eventually, strand by strand, bite through the cable, or at least weaken it to the point where the cable can no longer hold the fish. I have seen this happen more than once, and it has cost us a nice sized fish, before we moved to the leader system described above.

## Floats

The standard shark float has always been a simple balloon. They are easy to store, and during the fight the line will slip through the knot in the balloon, once the balloon has reached the rod tip, and the angler can just keep cranking. Some folks think that using a balloon is environmentally unfriendly. They have read about the devastating effect that a balloon can have if it is ingested by a sea turtle, ocean sunfish, or other creature that normally feeds on jellyfish.

While this is true, it is important to note that this type of injury to sea creatures is caused by Mylar balloons, which do not break down in the ocean environment. We have all seen these silvery balloons floating on the surface as we run to the offshore grounds. However, the cheap latex balloons that are typically sold in packages of ten to twenty readily break down in the marine environment or the digestive tract of a sea creature that mistakes one for something edible, and pose no threat to the environment. In the last several years the tackle shops have begun selling Styrofoam floats that have a tube in the center for the line to pass through.

Once the bait is at the desired depth, the line is simply doubled back onto the outside of the tube and held in place by a rubber band. These floats work well and are viable substitutes for the latex balloons. The biggest problem I have found with them is where to store them when you aren't fishing. If they get underfoot and someone steps on one, they quickly become a mess of extremely light plastic pieces that can wind up in the water. If you opt for these types of floats, please make sure that they are stored someplace where they are safely out of the way, so they don't wind up in the water

unattached to your fishing line.

## Baits

One of the researchers working in the NMFS Apex Predator program found that 70% of the diet of mako sharks in our area consists of bluefish. Does that tell you something? There is no better bait for a big mako than a live bluefish. Bluefish in the 2- to 5-pound range are ideal, at least from the standpoint of keeping them alive while you make the run to the sharking grounds. But bigger bluefish can and do work.

The best location for a live bluefish bait is at the furthest bait from the boat, well past any other baits you have in the water. The live bluefish will swim around, back and forth out there, as it is being dragged along by the boat. So you want to keep it well away from your other baits to avoid tangles. I also put the line to the live bluefish up on the tip of my upright outrigger to keep the line away from the closer baits.

My next closest bait to the boat is usually what we call a "mako sandwich." This bait consists of two bluefish filets with a whole squid in between. The filets are hooked, skin side in, with the squid in between them. The squid is positioned so that the tentacles extend beyond the end of the filets, where they can wave to any visitors.

The last bait that we put on a float, closest to the boat, is a whole mackerel. It is rigged so that the hook point exits the bait through its vent and the mouth and gills are sewn shut, to minimize spinning. The bait closest to the boat, fished without a float and right off the rod tip, about 40 feet down, is kind of a mini "mako sandwich." We use mackerel filets and small squid rigged like the real "mako sandwich." The reasoning behind this is that thresher sharks have a very small mouth for a fish their size, and this smaller bait allows them to get the hook in their mouth much quicker than if they take one of the larger baits.

## The Chum

Most shark fishermen simply purchase frozen cans of chum from their local bait supplier. The chum is tied off to the boat in either a flexible chum bag or a five-gallon bucket riddled with holes, and it basically takes care of itself. All the anglers have to do is check the chum once in a while and add another can when required. We like to add some "spice" to the chum slick by occasionally throwing some very small pieces of cut up mackerel or bunker.

The addition of two extra items to the chum line can be very helpful in attracting fish to the slick. The first item I like to add is menhaden (bunker) oil. This can be purchased as either pure oil or as "menhaden milk" at most bait dealers. When handling this stuff be careful! A drop spilled on deck will quickly make it as slippery as a skating rink! The easiest ways to dispense this liquid into the slick is either with an IV drip bag, which can be purchased at most medical supply stores or via a "sportstop" water bottle, the kind where you pull the top up to make the water flow. You can fill either the bag or the water bottle with the oil (best done over the side of the boat or before you head out) and then adjust the drip rate so it dispenses a drop every minute or so.

This fish came up tail wrapped and probably would have been lost on a mono leader. The second thing I like to add to the chum slick is some sort of sparkle. This simulates fish scales, which are a good indication of some sort of feeding frenzy. The problem is, what to use? Most of the stuff sold in hobby and party stores is some sort of plastic, which is not only bad for the environment, but also illegal. If you can't find a hobby or party store that sells some kind of organic sparkle, you can get some from the herring processing plants in Maine. Believe it or not, herring scales are used in several industries and are collected by the herring processing plants.

## The Hookset

You can often tell by the speed at which it moves if a pick up is a mako or thresher versus one of the more sedentary species. A blue shark will often lazily keep swimming toward the boat after picking up a bait, while a mako will go zipping along in any direction. If you think you might have a mako on the end of the line, just WAIT! It's probably the hardest thing to do in sharking, but you have to wait to make sure that the shark has the hook in its mouth before trying to set the hook. The seconds seems like minutes and the minutes seem like hours, but if you want a good chance of hooking the fish, you have to wait. Count to 100, get yourself a beer, make a sandwich, do anything but don't pick up that rod until at least a minute goes by. If the fish drops the bait, again, just wait. More times than not the fish will circle back and pick up the bait again. Do not start the engine(s). That will often spook the fish and send it heading over the horizon.

## The Battle

There really isn't much to say about the fight that won't come naturally to any veteran offshore angler. Get the angler into the chair or, if fighting standup, into a corner of the transom, start the engines and keep the angler in the best position to fight the fish.

## The End Game

Many veteran shark anglers have noticed that a good-sized thresher or mako will often come to the boat relatively easy during the first few minutes of the fight. Some call it the "look see" visit. At this point the fish is relatively "green" and still full of spunk. It's up to you if this happens, whether to simply let the fish swim away and fight it until it's easier to handle or to go for it, and try to secure the fish at first sight. Personally, I'll choose trying to secure the fish at first sight, every time, rather than fight it for some additional time and take all of the chances of equipment failure and whatever else can go wrong. Remember, Murphy was an optimist!

We much prefer to use a cockpit harpoon over a flying gaff. I only use a flyer when fishing in a tournament that disallows the use of a harpoon. When using a harpoon, it's important to go for the "button hole." Use as much strength as you have to push the dart completely through the fish, and hold onto the line. You don't want to give the fish a chance to build up a head of steam and hit the end of the line with a bang. You can gradually let the dart line slip through your gloved hand, if necessary, to lessen the chances of the dart pulling through when the line comes tight. When you first strike the fish, be it with a harpoon or flying gaff, many times the fish will go motionless for a few seconds. Be ready for this, and have a weighted tailrope at the ready to take advantage of the moment. If you act quickly you can have the fish tail roped and tied off before it knows what happened. But you must act quickly; you only have a few seconds before the fish goes completely bonkers. Good luck and catch 'em up!

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