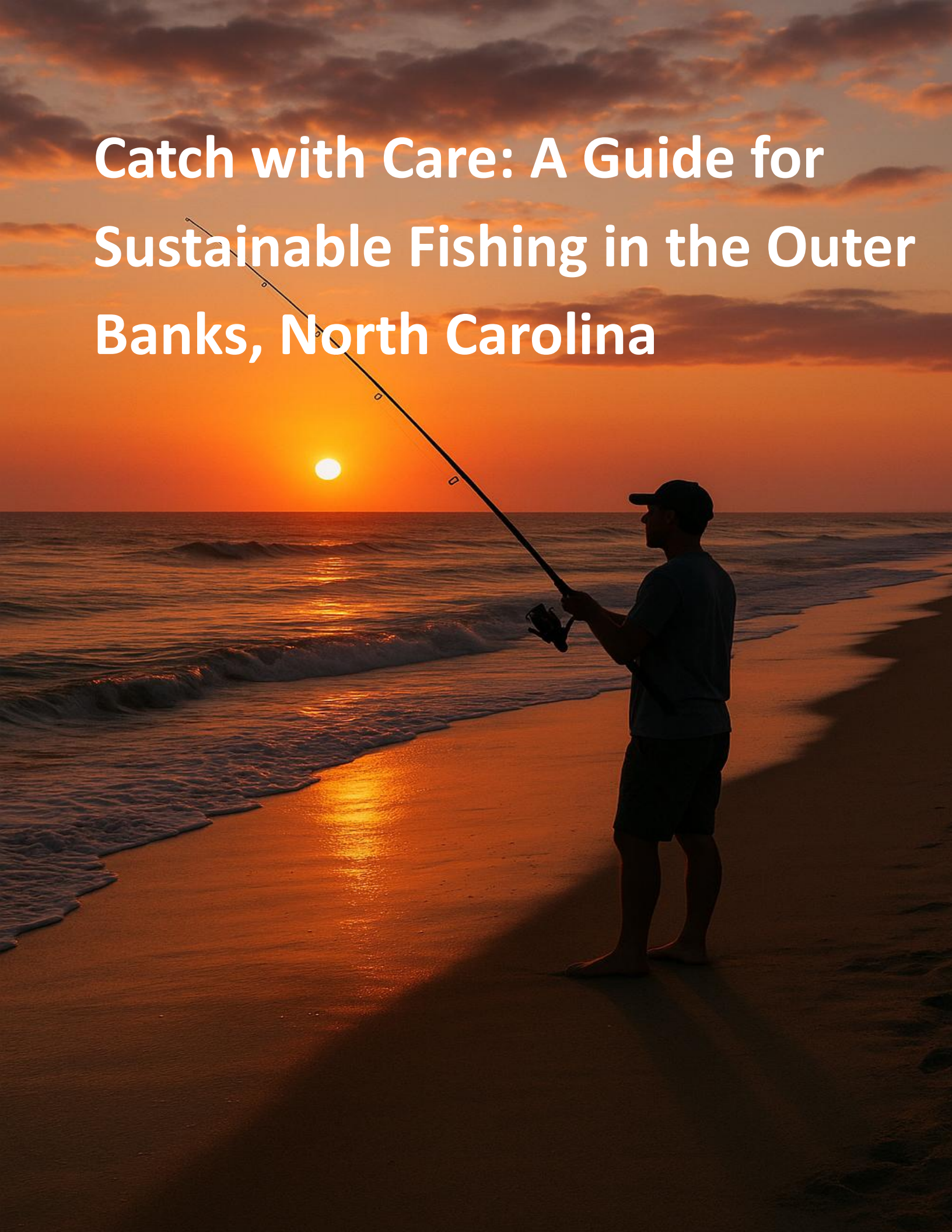


Catch with Care: A Guide for Sustainable Fishing in the Outer Banks, North Carolina



Forward

This pamphlet was created by the Outer Banks Coastal Conservation (OBCC), a nonprofit organization whose mission is to foster environmental stewardship and a deeper connection to the Outer Banks of North Carolina through outreach, education, and conservation efforts.

We believe that small stories can spark big change. That is why we have made this book available as a free resource for parents, teachers, and community members.

All materials in this pamphlet may be freely downloaded, shared, printed and used for educational or nonprofit purposes.

To learn more, access additional resources at: www.theobcc.org.



“Respect the Catch, Protect the Coast.”

Fishing the Outer Banks is a timeless tradition—but responsible anglers know that *how* you fish matters just as much as *what* you catch. This guide outlines best practices for ethical, low-impact fishing that supports healthy marine life and coastal ecosystems.

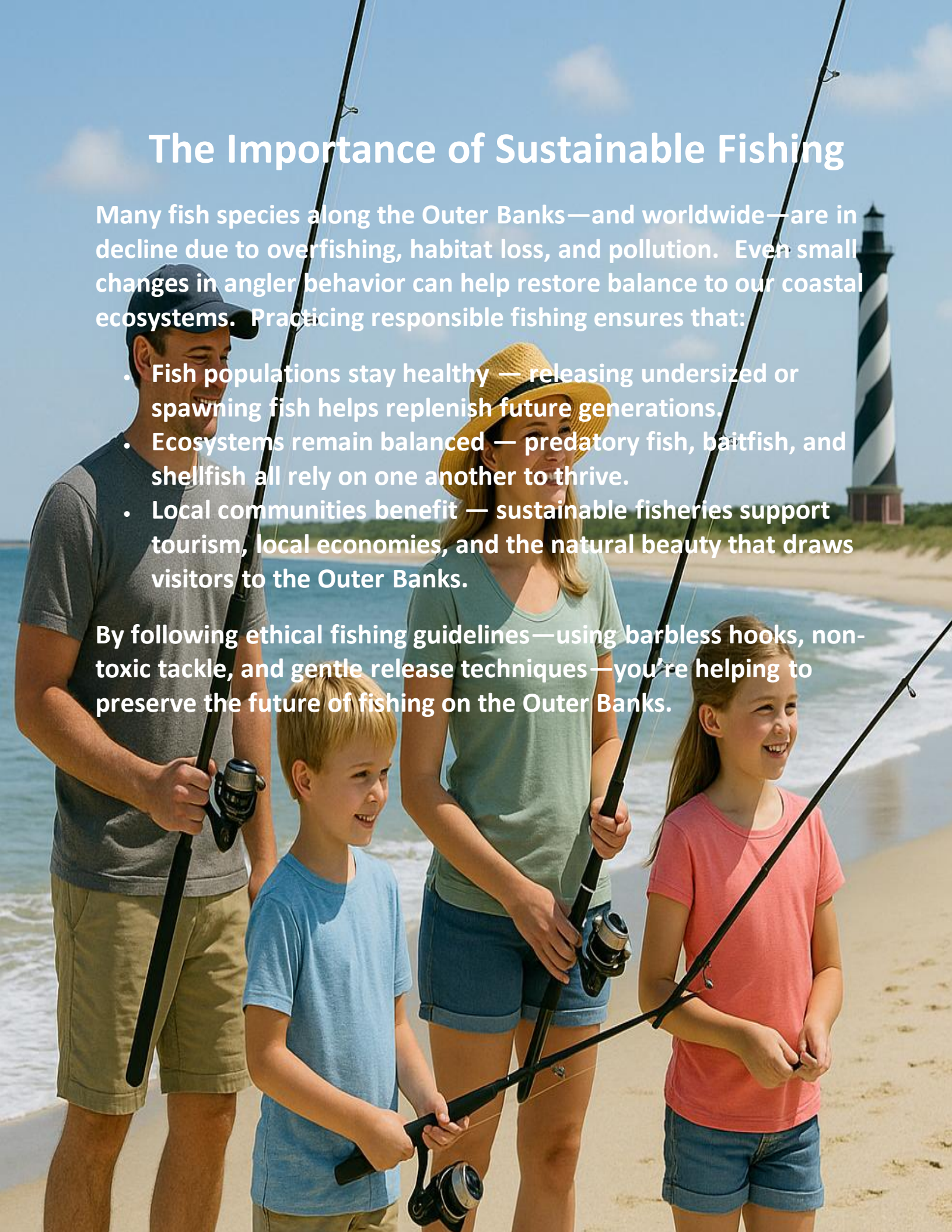


The Importance of Sustainable Fishing

Many fish species along the Outer Banks—and worldwide—are in decline due to overfishing, habitat loss, and pollution. Even small changes in angler behavior can help restore balance to our coastal ecosystems. Practicing responsible fishing ensures that:

- Fish populations stay healthy — releasing undersized or spawning fish helps replenish future generations.
- Ecosystems remain balanced — predatory fish, baitfish, and shellfish all rely on one another to thrive.
- Local communities benefit — sustainable fisheries support tourism, local economies, and the natural beauty that draws visitors to the Outer Banks.

By following ethical fishing guidelines—using barbless hooks, non-toxic tackle, and gentle release techniques—you're helping to preserve the future of fishing on the Outer Banks.

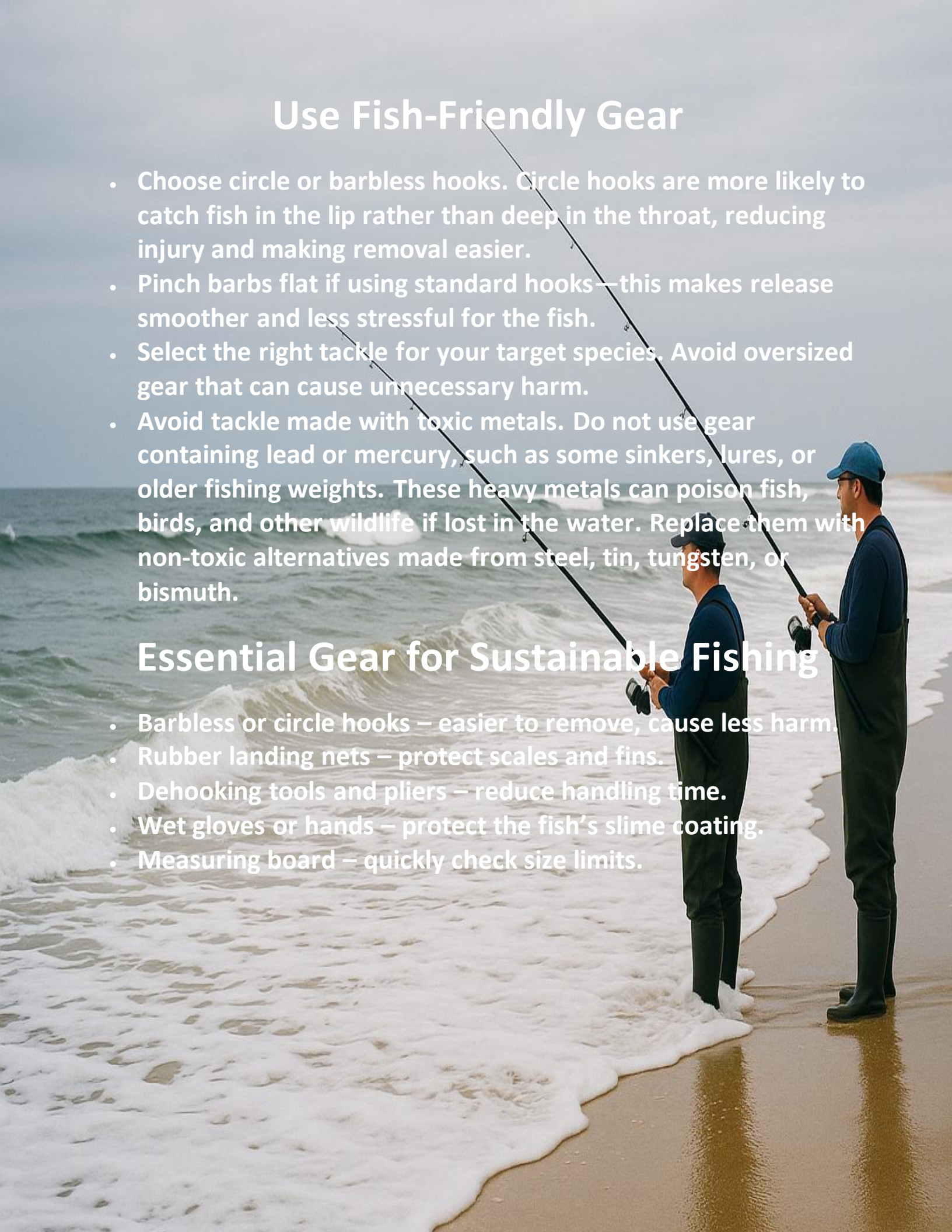


Use Fish-Friendly Gear

- Choose circle or barbless hooks. Circle hooks are more likely to catch fish in the lip rather than deep in the throat, reducing injury and making removal easier.
- Pinch barbs flat if using standard hooks—this makes release smoother and less stressful for the fish.
- Select the right tackle for your target species. Avoid oversized gear that can cause unnecessary harm.
- Avoid tackle made with toxic metals. Do not use gear containing lead or mercury, such as some sinkers, lures, or older fishing weights. These heavy metals can poison fish, birds, and other wildlife if lost in the water. Replace them with non-toxic alternatives made from steel, tin, tungsten, or bismuth.

Essential Gear for Sustainable Fishing

- Barbless or circle hooks – easier to remove, cause less harm.
- Rubber landing nets – protect scales and fins.
- Dehooking tools and pliers – reduce handling time.
- Wet gloves or hands – protect the fish's slime coating.
- Measuring board – quickly check size limits.



Keep Fish in the Water

- Whenever possible, unhook fish without removing them from the water.
- A fish's protective slime coat is vital for preventing infection and disease. If handling is necessary, wet your hands or use soft, wet gloves before touching the fish.
- Avoid laying fish on hot, dry, or sandy surfaces—these can damage scales and gills.



Unhook Gently and Quickly

- Use long-nose pliers, dehookers, or disgorgers to safely remove the hook.
- If the hook is deeply embedded, do not pull or twist forcefully. Instead, cut the line close to the hook and release the fish. Most hooks will rust away over time.
- Keep tools clean, rust-free, and ready for use to minimize handling time.



Revive Before Release

- Hold the fish in the water, facing it into the current or gently moving it forward and backward to pass water through its gills.
- Wait until the fish swims away under its own power before releasing.
- Take photos quickly, ideally with the fish partially submerged, to minimize stress.



Know the Laws and Local Rules

- A North Carolina Coastal Recreational Fishing License is required for most saltwater fishing.
- Check current size and bag limits at NCWildlife.org or local bait shops.
- Some species—like red drum, flounder, or speckled trout—may have seasonal closures or minimum size limits.
- Follow catch-and-release guidelines for protected or out-of-season fish.



Respect the Shoreline

- Dispose of monofilament line in designated recycling bins—it can entangle birds and sea turtles.
- Pack out all trash and leftover bait. Plastics and hooks can persist in the environment for years.
- Never use lead or mercury weights that could leach toxins into the water. Choose eco-safe options.
- Be mindful of nesting areas, dune vegetation, and wildlife. Avoid trampling sea oats or disturbing shorebirds.



Quick Reference Summary

Action

Use circle or barbless hooks
Avoid gear with lead or mercury
Keep fish wet
Handle gently
Cut the line if deep-hooked
Revive before release
Follow size and season rules

Why It Matters

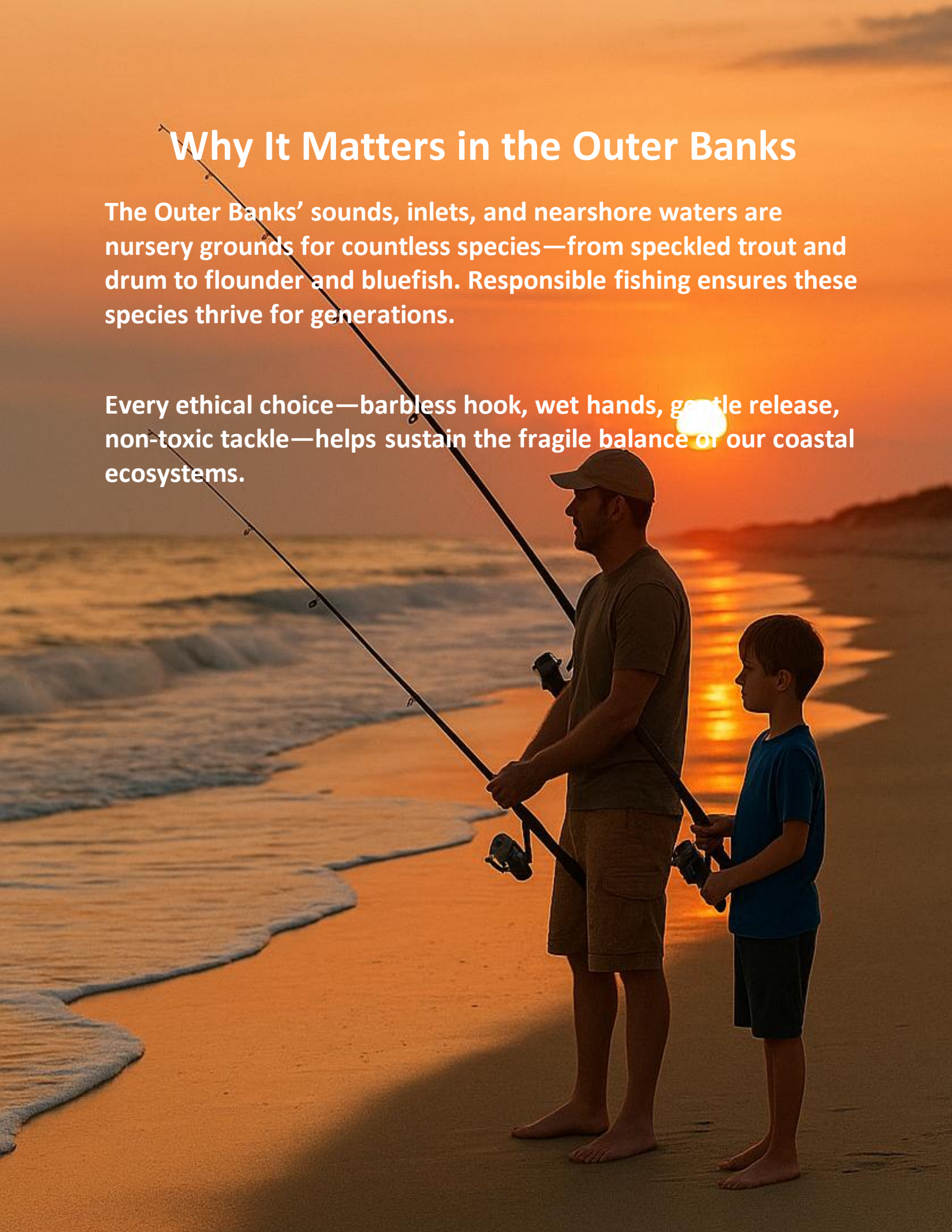
Reduces injury and improves survival after release
Prevents heavy-metal poisoning in wildlife
Protects slime coat and prevents stress
Avoids scale or fin damage
Prevents internal injuries
Ensures fish survival
Keeps fish populations sustainable



Why It Matters in the Outer Banks


The Outer Banks' sounds, inlets, and nearshore waters are nursery grounds for countless species—from speckled trout and drum to flounder and bluefish. Responsible fishing ensures these species thrive for generations.


Every ethical choice—barbless hook, wet hands, gentle release, non-toxic tackle—helps sustain the fragile balance of our coastal ecosystems.



Responsible Fishing Facts

Did You Know?

 Fish can die from stress even after release. Excessive handling or keeping a fish out of water for more than 30 seconds can cause fatal stress. Always minimize air exposure.

 Lead and mercury are toxic to wildlife. Lost sinkers and lures containing heavy metals can poison seabirds, turtles, and fish. Choose eco-safe weights made from tin, tungsten, steel, or bismuth instead.

 The Outer Banks is a nursery for many fish species. Juvenile flounder, drum, and speckled trout grow in local estuaries and sounds. Gentle catch-and-release practices help keep these populations strong.

 Monofilament fishing line never truly disappears. It can take 600 years to decompose. Always recycle line at local collection bins—many are found near OBX piers and marinas.

 Time of day and temperature matter. Fish released in cooler morning or evening waters have a better survival rate than those caught under hot midday sun.

 Undersized fish are the future of the fishery. Species like flounder and red drum must reach maturity before spawning. Releasing small fish helps ensure sustainable catches for everyone.

 Wet hands save fish lives. A fish's slime layer acts as a natural armor against parasites and bacteria. Dry hands or towels can strip this protection away.

 Healthy dunes = healthy fisheries. Coastal vegetation and living shorelines filter runoff, protect habitats, and maintain water quality that fish need to survive.

 Never discard bait, hooks, or packaging. Even “biodegradable” plastics can release toxins and harm wildlife. Always pack out what you bring in.

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