

# BARBLESS

YOU GOTTA BE KIDDING!

BY KURT KAWAMOTO

**F**riday, thank god it was Friday again. Time to go fishing. Fishing is my passion in life and being out there gives me a feeling of freedom that can't be matched by anything else. Thinking, dreaming, and hoping for the big one. Is this the weekend? Is it finally my chance? The anticipation was electric but soothing to my frayed work week nerves. While hoping not to have offended the fishing gods over what seemed like an overly loooong work week, a sense of urgency to get on the road enveloped me. Marc, my son and longtime fishing partner hurriedly went over the checklist.

We finally arrived at "da spot" and set up our gear. We hurriedly made the first casts and slid tako #1 into the depths. Before the next bait could be tied and slid the pole went off. The bell was going wild and the drag was being tortured. Just as I was going to yell "hanapaa" everything went silent. Trying to set a good example I just muttered under my breath while running to the now silent pole. Cut line again. Bankrupt! Hook, line, sinker, and fish - all gone. The frayed end section of the line told a story that many of us have experienced. Worse yet trying to slide a bait on the other pole would have to wait because my hands were shaking too much. Thank goodness for having a fishing partner. We were immediately back in action as Marc took over.

This was why we were here. The excitement is just beyond words when a big one hits. Unfortunately it doesn't happen everyday. That's what makes it so exhilarating. You catch the

bait, work the poles, and play the waiting game. If we're lucky we get the big strikes. Then we land some and we lose some. Unfortunately the latter is my norm. What happens when we lose them? How does it affect the big uluas that we tirelessly pursue every chance that we get? Those skinny looking uluas that we catch that have rusty old hooks in their mouth. Did we do that? Are we responsible? Can we do anything to help them out? Do we have any answers to pass on to the next generation of fishermen? Can we do anything so they can experience the same thrills catching fish for sport and the dinner table?

The NOAA Barbless Circle Hook project started up three years ago after some concerned biologists and fisheries managers looked at the interactions between shorefishing and protected species and tried to figure out how to lessen impacts on everyone. The occasional fisherman interaction with a seal or turtle could potentially pose large impacts on our island fishing activities, traditions, lifestyle, and culture. Modifying the standard circle hooks by crimping down the barbs to help out any accidentally hooked seals and turtles could potentially help them to help themselves. The barbless circle hooks were seen as potentially self shedding thus minimizing or eliminating the amount of handling of animals while removing the hooks.

Recently while reviewing the project, in a sudden moment of clarity, I realized that fishermen interact with magnitudes more fish than any protected species. It was definitely a "duuuh"

moment. Using a barbless circle hook would help many, many more fish than seals or turtles. After all, fishermen target fish and are good at doing that. Helping more fish is just helping our own goals get realized. Helping the turtles and seals is also helping our goal of sustainable fishing. Here was a way to help our kids continue to have what we so easily take for granted.

At the very beginning of the project NOAA investigated the science behind the often asked question of "is a barbless circle hook just as effective as one with a barb?" The researchers teamed up with the Kewalo Keiki Fishing Conservancy and the Division of Aquatic Resources Uluu Tagging Study to find out. Side by side fishing tests were done in Kewalo Basin where over 250 fish were caught. Many of the most common shoreline species were hooked and landed. When it was all said and done, scientifically there was no statistical difference. In normal speak, we couldn't tell the difference. The preliminary results of this one of a kind comparison were presented at the 2006 Annual American Fisheries Society meeting in Lake Placid, NY. Since then regular users of the barbless circle hooks have reported a couple of instances where losses have occurred. The most common way to lose fish was when it got "pinned down" or tangled up in the rocks where the fish create some slack line and took advantage of it to get away. Losing fish like this is also common while using barbed circle hooks. It happens to all of us. That's just how fishing works out sometimes.

The second concern I hear about when using the barbless hook often is, "my bait is not going to stay on." The next question being "How am I going to keep my bait on?" Most of the information gathered to answer this concern was from fisherman feedback during and after the fishing data collection outings conducted with cooperating fishing clubs. Even with their years of experience many were unsure of the outcome. After observing the fishing activities and talking with the volunteer fishermen there appeared to be no big problems with bait loss while baitcasting. Using live bait and sliding large baits for ulua was done in a traditional manner. It was tied or bridled on just like normal. The fishermen also used a home made friction lock fashioned from pieces of inner tubes, plastic six pack holders, or other tough, thin, rigid material. NOAA did come up with an additional way to bridle the baits on using zip ties and brass or stainless tubing (make your own applicator needles) available at any hardware store. However, long time habits die hard as the traditional proven methods of securing the baits were definitely preferred.

Questions on the effectiveness of catching small and large fish were dispelled early. The Kewalo Basin research clearly showed barbless hooks were as effective as barbed hooks. Using the appropriate size hook for specific size fish was also shown through the Kewalo study where the undersized hooks were crushed by the fish's powerful jaws allowing them to escape. The effectiveness of catching a larger fish such as an ulua was also evident early on as Mitchell Taketa, Atlapac Fishing Club, caught a 17.5 lb white ulua on July 8, 2005. This was on the first club outing where real fishing data was collected. Mitchell immediately followed it up with an ulua caught using a barbless circle hook on a Big Island trip the following month. More recently Randall Elarco Jr. of Hawi caught a huge 117 lb ulua on May 29, 2006 on a 16/0 Mustad circle hook. He got that lucky barbless circle hook in 2005 at the City and County Ohana Fishing Tournament weigh in where NOAA and the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Council were jointly doing outreach on sustainable fishing practices. Randall was presented with the first "100 pounder" NOAA Barbless Circle Hook award at the Pacific Islands Fisheries Group's First Annual Fishing and Seafood Festival on October 8, 2006. Honolulu Mayor Mufi Hanneman presented the historic award. There were many more ulua success stories that proved that big fish can be caught on barbless circle hooks.

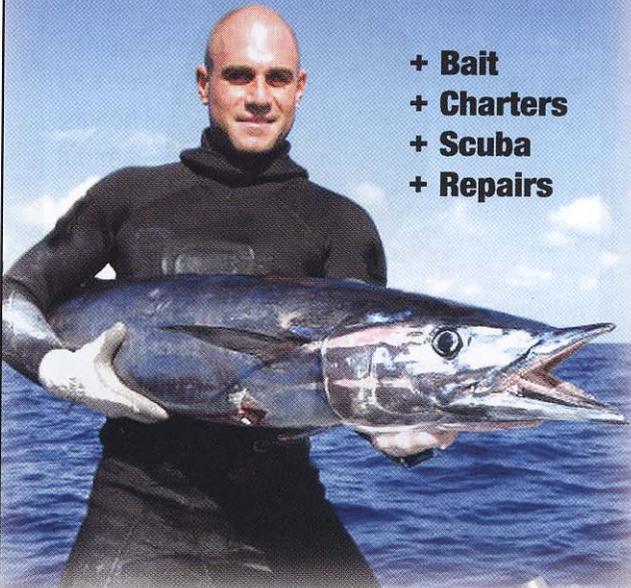
All it takes is the guts to try using the hooks.

The "800 pound gorilla in the room" question of "how do you know that the barbless circle hook will fall out of a monk seal's mouth more easily?" was one that was asked frequently at the tournament outreach events. The monk seals are an endangered species and therefore can't be used in this kind of research. Due to the low numbers of them living in the main Hawaiian Islands and the low hooking incidence we had no concrete or easy answers other than to say that with no barb it should be easier to fall out on its own. Then, in the summer of 2007, Justin Viezbicke, the Big Island monk seal coordinator, and his team were about to capture a hooked seal to perform the removal when the seal shook its head and the hook popped out. The hook turned out to be a barbless circle hook. At last proof positive, fully documented and photographed by an unbiased witness. For those fishermen who say that no barb means that a hook will lose you fish - how long do you think that barbless circle hook was in the unfortunate seal before it fell out? Certainly longer than it takes you to land even a 100 pounder.

The outreach efforts were done in conjunction with the State's Uluu Tagging Project, the Western Pacific Fishery Council's Partnering to Promote Sustainable Fisheries, and the Pacific Islands Regional Office's Recreational Fisheries Division. Since 2005 the partners have done outreach at tournaments and other events on the Big Island, Maui, Molokai, Oahu, and Kauai. The barbless circle hook project has worked with several fishing clubs on Oahu to gather data on the barbless fishing activities. In total over 40,000 barbless circle hooks have been given away for free to the fishing public.

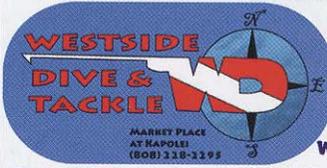
All of this activity has not gone unnoticed as the fishing tackle

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retailers, wholesalers, tournament organizers, school teachers, Boy Scouts, and other government agencies have contacted the program for more information or to get involved. Izuo Brothers, Ltd., the largest fishing tackle wholesaler in Hawaii has also actively supported the project. The largest public shorefishing tournaments, the Tokunaga Ulua Challenge and the Atlapac Weighmaster Classic, have supported the project from the beginning. In 2006 thanks to Mike Tokunaga(S. Tokunaga Store, Hilo), who had already incorporated the Ulua Tagging Challenge(State of Hawaii Ulua Tagging Project) within his tournament a couple of years earlier, and the Atlapac Fishing Club(Oahu) the first ever barbless circle hook divisions were created within their larger tournament. The numbers of fishermen entering the barbless competition has since increased annually with men, women, and children of all ages trying their luck and successfully catching fish. It is only a matter of time before someone wins a tournament using a barbless circle hook.

Other popular tournaments such as the Lihue Fishing Supply(Kauai), the Pole Benders(Big Island), the Hilo Casting Club(Big Island), the Parks and Recreation Ohana Shoreline(Big Island), and the Maui Casting Club have also supported the effort by allowing NOAA to distribute information and sample packs of hooks for the participants to try.

An additional goal of the project is to gather data that is useful in further validating the effectiveness of barbless circle hooks and to document some catch rates of local recreational shoreline fishing activities.

The Atlapac Fishing Club, the Windward Surf Casters, the Kewalo Keiki Fishing Conservancy, and various individuals have voluntarily participated in research to collect this important and necessary data.

Although the program has only been in existence for three years, the successes are many. Very large fish and a diverse number of species have been caught. A growing number of anglers now request the free hook sample packs, the numbers of participants in the barbless circle hook tournament division continues to increase, and very importantly the monk seal that shed the barbless circle hook without intervention are highlights. Seeing these successes there has been an increase in the number of tournament organizers requesting to be included. The monk seal that shook the hook without intervention could be the poster child for responsible fishing practices that enable the animals to help themselves. So challenge yourself and consider using a barbless circle hook the next time you go fishing. You can be a part of ensuring that fishing will always be here for our kids.

LAWA'I'A

## CONTACTS AND MORE INFORMATION

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The NOAA Barbless Circle Hook Project's newsletter containing information on the last 3 years of activity is available at the Pacific Islands Regional Office Recreational Fishing web page at [http://www.fpir.noaa.gov/RCF/rcf\\_barbless\\_hook\\_proj.html](http://www.fpir.noaa.gov/RCF/rcf_barbless_hook_proj.html).

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## BARBLESS CIRCLE HOOKS: THE SHORT OF IT

- The absence of the barb on a barbless circle hook allows it to be self shedding.
- Fishermen should try to take care of their target species.
- Most fishing areas have no protected species but using barbless hooks would likely benefit the stocks of fish that you like to catch and eat.
- Using barbless circle hooks in areas that have protected species shows your respect for fellow shoreline users.
- NOAA barbless circle hook research shows the effectiveness of the hook in holding bait and catching fish.
- When doing catch(or tag) and release, the barbless circle hook allows for a quicker more trauma free release of the fish.
- The use of barbless circle hooks can minimize your injury and save a fishing day.
- Pinching down the barb on an oama hook will save you time, energy, and frustration enabling you to catch more oama.

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4



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# You catch?

## We'd like to know.

Information from all fishermen - not just the commercial guys - is essential to managing our fisheries. It's also the best way to demonstrate the importance of recreational fishing in our islands. The next time you're asked to report, either through the State's Hawaii Marine Recreational Fishing Survey or some other means, please do so. It's a way for you and your catch to be counted, and support informed decisions that affect your fishing future.



Coming Soon: The Marine Recreational Information Program - a partnership of public and private organizations to gather the most accurate and timely data on the condition of our saltwater fisheries. [www.fpir.noaa.gov/mrip.html](http://www.fpir.noaa.gov/mrip.html)



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