Australian Underwater Federation

Codes of Practice for Safe, Sustainable & Selective Spearfishing

Prepared with assistance of many contributors

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Father and son with captured wahoo – Moreton Island Qld

1) BACKGROUND TO SPEARFISHING IN AUSTRALIA

Spearfishing in Australia dates back to the early twentieth century. Spearfishers, using very basic yet effective equipment, braved the elements to fish near coastal waters. The sport rapidly developed in a short time and in 1948 the Underwater Spearfishing Association of NSW (now the AUF) was formed by a small group of dedicated divers, located at Long Reef in Sydney. This hardy band of spearfishing pioneers looked into every reef and headland along the coast north and south of Sydney, becoming part of spearfishing's heritage. Around this time competition spearfishing began and numerous clubs formed around Australia.

In those early days spearfishing and scuba divers were viewed as a single group and worked together, similar to the sector in modern day New Zealand and New Caledonia. In the formative years the AUF made a decision to ban spearfishing using self-contained breathing apparatus (SCUBA). The sporting spirit shown back then has shaped 'skin-diving' (diving with just the use of mask, snorkel and fins) into a personally challenging and physically demanding recreational pursuit. Spearfishing has extended down through family generations and today is a skill that continues to be passed down to the younger generations. It is a genuine family recreational activity enjoyed by many.

Competitors in the 17th National Spearfishing Championships – Ocean Grove, Victoria 1968

2) SPEARFISHING EVENTS

Spearfishing, like any other sport, contains individuals who desire to test their skill against other individuals and that is why the AUF endorses competitive spearfishing events. From the very beginning of competition in Australia the controlling body led the way in setting standards to protect the environment. Many angling competitions are now catch and release and achieving similar outcomes as Spearfishing competitions which is great news across the board. These Codes of Practice have been developed to minimise the impact spearfishing has on the environment and all fish taken are required to be used for human consumption. Continuing this trend, modern spearfishing competitions are underpinned by standards that promote environmental, social, economic and safety criteria. "Neatfish" (otherwise known as the Standard for National Environmental Assessment of Tournament Fishing) is one example. "Film fishing" is yet another initiative.

3) WHERE TO SPEARFISH

The Australian coastline has many exciting places to go spearfishing:

- Headlands, harbours, bays and estuaries
- Rocky reefs and coral
- Offshore islands
- Fish aggregating devices (FADs)
- Shipwrecks and other artificial structures
- Underwater features
- Bluewater (open 'pelagic' offshore marine waters)

However, please be aware that many bathing pools, ocean beaches, river/estuary entrances and break walls, coastal lagoons and estuaries and other tidal waters are closed to spearfishing, as are some areas within aquatic reserves and marine parks. It is recommended that you avoid busy areas and use common sense when selecting where to spearfish. Generally, all freshwater is closed to spearfishing.

If you are unsure about local regulations, make sure you check with your local DPI Fisheries office before you go. Great locations within the heavily populated coastal areas are also enjoyed by many other water users and particular care needs to be taken in such places.

4) CARING FOR OUR MARINE ENVIRONMENT

As spearfishers we get to explore many parts of Australia's magnificent coast. From lush estuarine seagrass beds to isolated rocky bays and spectacular offshore reefs as well as traveling out to and beyond the edge of the continental shelf seeking the productive Australian Currents and the range of pelagic species that ride it.

These wide-ranging journeys give spearfishers a unique opportunity to observe and care for our diverse marine environments. There are many practical ways that spearfishers can increase their contribution to caring for the marine environment.

Each year many divers participate in "Clean up Australia Day" by removing tonnes of rubbish from our waterways - check with your local spearfishing club to join in the fun. Clean up days are a great social event and an excellent way to improve your dive fitness.

AUF spearfishers participating in "Clean Up Australia Day" – Tweed River, NSW 2021

Introduced marine pests pose a threat to our native biodiversity. Spearfishers can assist the effort to combat these invaders by reporting sightings of pest species to their State Government Department.

Spearfishers frequently get to observe threatened or protected species such as whales, white sharks, grey nurse sharks, black rock cod and many others. As these species are hard to study our reports provide a valuable source of data to assist with their management. Many States/Territories have an ongoing threatened, protected and pest species sighting program and a handy booklet with pictures and information about these species. Contact your State Government Department.

If you suspect illegal fishing activity you should report it to your State Government Department.

Marine mammal strandings and entanglements should also be reported.

Pollution such as oil spills and illegal dumping threaten our marine environment. Spearfishers should report pollution incidents.

The Australian coastline has many shipwrecks some of which have yet to be discovered. You can help protect and enjoy these sites by reporting them to the Heritage Branch of your local State/Territory government.

As underwater fishers we have the unique opportunity to be selective in our catch and care for our special marine environment. Responsible spearfishers abide by these Spearfishing Codes of Practice.

State Government Departments:

Qld: Department of Agriculture and Fisheries | https://www.daf.qld.gov.au/

NSW: Department of Primary Industries | https://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/fishing

Vic: Victorian Fisheries Authority | https://vfa.vic.gov.au/

WA: Primary Industries and Regional Development | http://www.fish.wa.gov.au/Pages/Home.aspx

SA: Department of Primary Industries and Regions | https://www.pir.sa.gov.au/fishing

NT: NT Fisheries | https://nt.gov.au/marine/recreational-fishing

Tas: Department of Natural Resources and Environment | https://nre.tas.gov.au/sea-fishing-aquaculture/recreational-fishing

5) SPEARFISHERS INTERACTING WITH OTHER USER GROUPS

0ur beaches, headlands, reefs and harbours are extremely popular with a wide variety of user groups, including anglers, swimmers, surfers, SCUBA divers, picnickers, walkers and local residents. While spearfishers have the same rights of enjoyment as everyone else, they also have a responsibility to be considerate of other user groups in choosing when, where and how to go diving. Community views on spearfishing tend to be highly polarized, and while there will always be plenty of people who will admire a successful spearfisher as he or she wades ashore, there will also be others who take a less positive view – and it tends to be only the complaints that receive attention. Remember, a single complaint can easily outweigh the good of many compliments.

Below are some specific tips on how to behave around other user groups:

- Always follow the '*first in first served*' principle and respect the right of anglers, swimmers, other users or spearfishers who are in an area before you arrive.
- If you think there may be a potential conflict, talk to the other users if possible. Often a quick courteous conversation can avoid misunderstanding and ill-feeling.
- Keep well away from SCUBA divers. They are there to enjoy the fish life; but are limited in how far they can travel underwater – you can always spearfish somewhere further along the reef.
- Never intrude on the fishing activity of any land or boat-based anglers. If you need to swim past some anglers on the shore, try to establish how they are fishing, and swim past or around them accordingly. If in doubt, ask them. They might be fishing in close for various species, in which case you can swim wide around them without spooking the fish; conversely if they are casting wide, they probably won't mind you passing beneath their feet.
- Do not enter the water close to other boats already around a FAD (Fish Attraction Device) and be prepared to take turns to accommodate new arrivals. Check out the local State / Territories FAD's Code of Conduct if such exists.
- Keep well clear of areas crowded with swimmers or surfers regardless of what fish might be also there. If you must pass through such areas, always unload your gun and cover your spearhead. If you wish to fish in such areas, go early morning or late afternoon when fewer people are about.
- Respect the feelings of others who may be frightened or intimidated by your appearance and the gun / spear you may be carrying.
- Carry your gun / spear in a lightweight Lycra style bag or wrapping when in populated areas and avoid beaches, walkways, promenades etc. Keep your gear in your car when not going to or from water entry point.
- Enter the water away from other water users, swimmers or snorkelers. Avoid going close to others whilst in the water and never allow your gun / spear to point at anyone. Look around constantly to avoid being to close.
- Never interfere with other's fishing gear, equipment or catches – and this includes lobster pots, fish traps and fish farm cages. Remember it is an offence to interfere with commercial fishing gear and fines apply.
- Avoid, where possible, confrontational types of behavior when spearfishing or when entering or leaving the water. **WALK AWAY FROM CONFLICT.**
- Try to be an ambassador for the sport – always be courteous to anyone who approaches you, even if their views do not agree with your own. Never ever show aggression or deliberately intimidate others.

User perception is very important to the future of spearfishing. By adopting the above practices and spreading the word, you can help ensure that the sport has a viable future. The message for spearfishing is simple: "BE RESPONSIBLE OR WE'LL ALL BE GONE"

Cover of Australian Skindiving and Spearfishing Digest advertising the ***Anglers vs Spearos*** *Competition, 1958.*
This competition started in 1952 and later became the Canada Cup.
NSW Central Coast

6) SAFETY RULES & SPEARFISHING IN GENERAL

These safety rules are intended to minimize the risk of injury or mishap to divers engaged in spearfishing. Divers are encouraged to adopt these rules without exception and to promote them amongst divers who may not be familiar with them. It is the responsibility of all participants to make our sport as safe as possible.

While engaged in Spearfishing you should:

- Tow a safety coloured float (yellow, orange or red) with an international "code A" flag (signifying diver below) displayed in a vertical position above the float, It is highly recommended that you colour your float fluoro yellow green and also carry a flag of this colour on the float with the alpha flag.
- In many states and territories maritime regulations (eg NSW) it is a requirement that your boat display a "code A" (diver below) alpha flag. It is highly recommended that you fly a similar sized fluoro yellow green flag directly below the Alpha flag.
- Ensure your boat is securely anchored in a safe location. Where drift diving or using an unanchored boat with driver always ensure the driver is qualified and briefed on signals and procedures for diver drop-offs and pickups.
- Attach captured fish in or to the towed float so that the fish are carried away from your body. Where sharks are a risk deposit your catch into the boat as quickly as possible.
- Carry a knife that is attached to your body which is readily accessible. It is sensible to carry two knifes, one of which can be reached with either hand.
- Carry a plastic whistle and a reflective signal mirror.
- Wear a weight belt fitted with a single hand operated, quick-release buckle.
- Never load or carry a loaded speargun out of the water (always load a speargun after entering the water and unload the speargun before seeking to leave the water).
- Ensure that spear tips are suitably sheathed or removed while not in use.
- Never allow your speargun to point at another person, where visibility is poor always ensure the firing of your gun will not harm an unseen object.
- Ensure that you are not under the influence of any drugs or medication that may impair your senses, judgment or physical ability.
- Cease diving if for any reason you are not feeling well.
- Take liquids to ensure that you do not suffer the effects of dehydration.
- Avoid hyperventilating before holding your breath. A simple way to avoid over hyperventilation is to never take more than three slow and controlled breaths before diving.
- Always dive with a buddy and keep them or their float in sight. Tell someone where you will be diving and your estimated time of return.
- Always dive within the limits of your own ability and never push your limits for the sake of taking a fish.
- Obtain a current weather report for the time that you will be diving.
- Be on the alert for boat traffic and ensure that you are visible to passing vessels.
- Be aware of the General Public and do not engage in actions which may endanger them.

spear safe
AUSTRALIAN SPEARFISHING SAFETY INITIATIVE

'Spear Safe' is an AUF national initiative to improve safety for Australian spearfishers. The initiative has brought together a cohesive view on safety issues involved with spearfishing | https://spearsafe.webs.com/

THE PROPERLY EQUIPED DIVER
• Ensure that speartips are suitably sheathed while not in use. Never load or carry a loaded speargun out of the water.
• Ensure that you are not under the influence of any drugs or medication that may impair your senses, judgment or physical ability.
• Cease diving if for any reason you are not feeling well.
• Take liquids to ensure that you do not suffer the effects of dehydration.
• Wear a weight belt fitted with a single hand operated, quick release buckle.
• Carry a knife that is attached to your body and which is readily accessible.
•Safety coloured float with a dive flag. Carry a whistle and signal mirror.
•Attach fish to a rig line so that the fish are away from your body
YAMAHA
70

7) SANCTIONED / AUTHORISED TRAINING FOR SPEARFISHING

Training for spearfishing events for AUF Members may include: professional instruction; pool training; ocean training; spearfishing; skills enhancement; scouting / exploration; running / jogging / walking; and suitable gym work. These activities and fitness regimes should always be undertaken with at least another responsible competent person in attendance.

AUF Members should notify a competent person or other authority of their planned training event and log in and out with such person or authority who should be instructed in what actions to take if something goes wrong.

Whilst undertaking training for a spearfishing event:

- AUF Members must abide by these AUF Codes of Practice.
- AUF Members whilst training will always be accompanied whilst in the water with a 'buddy' spearfisher or competent swimmer.
- When training as an individual (ie for individual events, traditional pairs events or teams events) each AUF Member must have a complying float / flag as defined in the '*A Section Rules*' and each person must remain in sight of their buddies float, and check on their buddies surface position frequently to suit the conditions.
- When training for "True Pairs" events the two buddies are to share one common complying float / flag where one diver who is taking a turn on the surface is attached to the float by a float line. This diver must not dive except in emergencies and always stay attached to and close to the float. The diver taking the turn to dive whilst practicing spearfishing must be attached by a line not exceeding 40 metres. This line to be attached to either the diver's person or their gun and the other end to the common float; or if using a slide ring on the float, the other divers gun or person.
- Only one person at a time can take a turn diving in 'True Pairs' training and the non-diving buddy is responsible to watch over the position of the diving person at all times.
- In deep water the divers are encouraged to swap over and communicate often enough to prevent either becoming fatigued.
- Pairs should only dive depths that both are capable of.

Spearfishers 'buddy diving' in pairs

8) GREY NURSE SHARKS

Reported sightings and recent shark counts indicate that the population of Grey Nurse Sharks is larger than previously thought and may be on the increase.

To protect the species for future generations of divers to enjoy, please adhere to the AUF Code of Practice for diving with Grey Nurse Sharks.

This code represents the minimum standards of behaviour and actions required when spearfishing in proximity to Grey Nurse Sharks. The code is part of the membership commitments to the AUF.

When spearfishing near where Grey Nurse Sharks congregate:

- Keep a minimum distance of five (5) meters at all times.
- Do not knowingly allow sharks to steal catches.
- Refrain from all forms of flashlight photography of sharks.
- When sharks move to within five (5) meters discreetly retreat avoiding the projected path of the shark. If the sharks appear agitated, move out of the area.
- Assist in any scientific research in conjunction with local DPI personnel. (This may include the tagging process to establish movements or initiatives such as the Great Australian Shark count)

You may also wish to check out:

https://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/635092/GNS-Protection-Guide.pdf

Skindiver observing a Grey Nurse Shark – Stradbroke Island Qld

9) THREATENED / PROTECTED SPECIES

Rules governing protected species apply to all recreational fishers. This code of practice for protected species aims to further enforce these regulations within the spearfishing community and similarly educate divers on the importance of preservation.

- Ongoing evidence is required on the quantities and areas where Grey Nurse Sharks and other threatened or protected species abound in order to assess their current status. Members are encouraged to report any sightings of protected and threatened species.
- Information includes:
    - Species, sex and number sighted
    - Locality (specific as possible)
    - Date and time
    - Sea and Weather Conditions
    - Water depth, visibility and temperature
    - Size and behavior
- This code of practice applies to all AUF members. Members will make themselves familiar as to what species are “protected” and classified as “threatened” (i.e. vulnerable or endangered) according to the provisions of the National or local DPI/Fisheries.
- Members will not knowingly disturb protected or threatened species or their habitat. Members will try to educate those who may not otherwise be aware.

10) SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

Spearfishers Think Twice!

Due to the growing popularity of social medial, the AUF would like to provide you all with some things to think about. While social media offers the opportunity for spearfishers to gather in online communities to share, discuss and consume spearfishing content, it also provides for constant monitoring of both real and imagined wrongs and countless unmonitored discussion forums. It is therefore fundamental that we all take care not to bring the sport, the AUF or its affiliate clubs into disrepute through the inappropriate use of social media. Things such as inter-sport political spats and personality clashes should not be aired through the use of social media.

- **Respect our marine life**: Conserve our fish stocks and take only what you need. Nobody likes the look of your entire catch spread out across the floor; photographs can easily be taken out of context and often make spearfishers look bad.
- **Be sensible**: Never post content that results in public disfavor towards our sport and if you see something along these lines speak up; we are all ambassadors for the sport when we contribute online and we must mentor and educate our fellow and beginner divers as the need arises.
- **Bigger is not better:** There is a misconception among spearfishers that bigger is always better and constantly sharing photos of large fish only perpetuates that myth. Continually targeting large fish from a handful of species is unsustainable and we strongly discourage this practice.
- **Are we adding unnecessary pressure to the fishery?** Sharing photographs of your catch often leads to intense and unnecessary pressure in your favorite spot and the fishery in general.
- **Be humble not boastful:** Constantly posting photos of your catches might make you feel good, but does it really do anything positive for our sport? We ask that people think twice before constantly posting photographs as it can create an unfavorable impression of spearfishers.

- **Others are Watching and Waiting:** We should all consider the effectiveness of the use of photos by activists in having the Greyhound racing industry shut down in NSW with dubious claims being lobbied. The same activists have now started a campaign against commercial fishing using photos depicting struggling fish in nets and on the decks of vessels. Just think about the mass of photo's of large reef and pelagic fish they will use in their next campaign against recreational fishing, in particular spearfishing. Guess who's providing all the ammunition they need? **Please Just Think About It?**
- **Guard our seas from lawbreakers:** We trust that all spearfishers immediately report any unlawful or suspicious fishing activities to their relevant state authority.
- **Log off and sign-up:** Spearfishing clubs are usually brimming with knowledge and know-how and they are a great place to meet other divers. Participating in a club and learning from experienced divers is undoubtedly the fastest way to improve your diving.
- **Public perception** is incredible important to the future of Spearfishing. By adopting the above practices and by spreading the word, you can help ensure that the sport has a viable future.

The message is simple: "BE RESPONSIBLE OR WE'LL ALL BE GONE".

11) AUF CODES OF PRACTICE FOR SPEARFISHING IN SUMMARY

These Codes of Practice for spearfishing in Australia and information about caring for the environment have been developed as a minimum standard. The aim is to ensure that all spearfishers are aware of the high standard of behavior expected.

Preservation of the marine environment and the sport are mutual objectives. This code applies to all members of the AUF. It is intended to discourage certain types of unacceptable behavior which may discredit the sport of spearfishing. Serious cases, such as members willingly engaged in illegal activities, may result in penalties including suspension or expulsion. Please become familiar with these guidelines and the **Codes of Conduct**:

- Consider the safety of yourself and other people at all times.
- Know and at all times practice the Spearfishing and Freediving safety rules and principles in this document.
- Respect our marine life by never taking more game than for your immediate personal needs, spread your effort by only taking one or two of each legal specie.
- Respect our marine life by never harming unwanted game, despatch your captures quickly and humanely.
- Know and at all times obey boating regulations including:
    - Carrying required safety equipment;
    - make sure your boat is third party insured;
    - Navigating safely at all times, ensuring drivers are licensed;
    - Ensure that the designated driver can operate safely with divers in the water; and
    - Take care when anchoring, check your anchor for security and avoid seabed damage.
- Know and at all times obey Local State / Territories fisheries regulations including:
    - Hold a current recreational fishing licence where required;
    - Research and be aware of size and bag limits for target species for the area where you plan to fish;
    - Ensure you research and are well aware of bans on the taking of threatened of protected species in the area you are diving;
    - The sale of fish by recreational fishers illegal and large fines apply; and
    - Ensure you research and are well aware of any areas that are closed to spearfishing.

Guard our seas from law breakers by reporting suspicious or illegal activity to the proper authorities.

Always co-operate with regulatory authority officers performing their duty. Show consideration towards other water users pursuing their own recreation. Clean your catch at a designated cleaning area or away from general public areas. Whenever you go diving never leave your rubbish behind. Never act in a way which results in public disfavour towards our sport or our organisation. Maintain 50 metres distance from anglers, where it is safe to do so.

The AUF is a not-for-profit organization that relies on support from marine enthusiasts throughout the States and Territories of Australia to effectively advocate for the sustainable use of our marine environment. For further information or to become a member visit https://auf.com.au/

SAFE and ENJOYABLE SPEARFISHING TO ALL

Contact us through https://auf.com.au/sports/spearfishing/

AUF Spearfishing – Safe Sustainable Selective Seafood

Three generations of spearfishers - Paxman family - WA