

# Casa Vieja Practices Conservation Today to Protect Billfish for the Future

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**In calm waters off the coast of Guatemala, a 100-pound Pacific sailfish is slowly reeled closer to one of Casa Vieja Lodge's classic sportfish boats, having performed a breath taking series of jumps and dives just moments earlier.**

But instead of reaching for a gaff to bring the sailfish on board, the captain slowly moves the boat forward, matching the speed of the fish swimming nearby, its purple sail breaking the surface of the water.

A crew member with a long stick about the size of a pool cue skillfully inserts a tag between the sailfish's shoulder blades by the dorsal fin while another mate grabs its bill and cuts the fishing line as close to the circle hook as possible. After a few minutes, the sailfish swims away. The specially designed hook will probably fall out in a day or two.

"Sustainability is a critical issue for us," explains Kristen Salazar, who owns Casa Vieja with her husband David, a 25-year veteran of the charter fishing business and a longtime captain. "We like to say, 'No fish. No fishing.'"

Customers know when they step on one of the lodge's six charters that if they catch a billfish it will have to be released in accordance with Guatemalan law. The lodge takes the extra step of tagging billfish to help gather critical scientific and socio-economic data that will help researchers to better understand growth rates, migratory habits, habitat utilization and more.

Casa Vieja recently took delivery of two new Cummins QSB 6.7L engines, roughly the same engines that power Ram heavy duty pickup trucks. When those engines are installed, all of the lodge's boats will be powered by Cummins. That is important because tagging and releasing billfish requires a captain with steady hand and a dependable engine.

After a billfish is caught, the captain will often bump the boat in and out of gear while a crew member holds the fish's bill, guiding it side to side in a swimming motion to push water over its gills. This gets more oxygen into the fish, essentially helping it to catch its breath before being released.

"Captains are only as good as their boats," Kristen Salazar says, looking at her husband with a smile.

The lodge has long been a leader in billfish conservation, even before the Salazars took over Casa Vieja a



Casa Vieja Lodge wants to conserve billfish to ensure sport fisherman in the future can enjoy moments like this. The crew member on the far right has a GoPro camera in the water to capture the action as an alternative to pulling the fish out of the water for a photo. (Photo courtesy of Casa Vieja Lodge)

little over a year ago. The Billfish Foundation, a leader in billfish conservation around the world, has honored the lodge with multiple tagging awards – both for its captains, mates, and anglers, too.

Despite laws like Guatemala's protecting the billfish, and despite lodges like Casa Vieja that practice conservation, billfish are in some trouble. Various studies supported by The Billfish Foundation and other organizations suggest there has been a significant reduction in billfish size and abundance since the 1970s.

The threat to billfish doesn't just come from sport fishermen who ignore "don't kill" laws. Billfish mortality is also attributable to commercial operations that accidentally catch billfish in their pursuit of more profitable and better tasting fish.

This takes an economic toll on Central American countries. Studies show that a billfish caught and released can generate 10 times or more in tourism-related revenue than the revenue generated by a billfish caught and killed by a commercial fishing operation.

There are still enough billfish off the coast of Guatemala to keep sport fishermen coming back to Casa Vieja. The Salazars estimate each of their boats will catch and release 15 to 20 billfish per day. They want to ensure that will happen for generations to come.

"Tagging not only allows a way for scientists to learn more about these magnificent and economically important species, it allows anyone to be involved in billfish conservation," says Peter Chaibongsai, The Billfish Foundation's Director of Science and Policy.

"Casa Vieja Lodge is one of the only lodges in the world to provide their clients the opportunity to be part of something bigger – to help learn and conserve the species they love to fish for and see."