HOW GOVERNMENT CAN DELIVER ITS AMBITION TO PREVENT BYCATCH OF DOLPHINS, PORPOISES AND WHALES IN UK FISHERIES
To meet its Fisheries Act commitment to minimise and where possible eliminate sensitive species bycatch, UK and devolved governments should:

- Set clear, ambitious annual targets to reduce bycatch every year until it is stopped
- Invest in bycatch solutions for the UK fleets, including trials and roll-out of alternative gears, effective technical and spatial solutions on fishing gear and independent at sea monitoring to track progress

More than 1,000 dolphins, porpoises and whales are killed each year in UK fisheries

Research commissioned by Whale and Dolphin Conservation (WDC) and Humane Society International (HSI) finds that we can save hundreds of porpoises and dolphins from asphyxiation by replacing gill nets, which have been identified as a particular threat, with alternative gears

Government should also develop mitigation plans that can be put into action as soon as there is any evidence that bycatch is occurring for all trawl fisheries that may pose a risk, together with adequate independent at sea monitoring

Government should require modifications for pot and creel gears together with ongoing trials of better management practices

It is estimated that more than 1,000 dolphins, porpoises and whales (collectively called cetaceans) are killed each year in UK fisheries. Harbour porpoise, common dolphin, minke and humpback whale are the species most affected, but at least 15 species have been recorded as bycaught and all cetaceans in UK waters are vulnerable. Bycatch is problematic for fishers too - aside from their sympathy for dolphins, porpoises and whales, bycatch disrupts their work and damages equipment.

The level of suffering for individuals who become entangled in fishing gear has been described as ‘one of the grossest abuses of wild animal sensibility in the modern world’. Cetaceans don’t drown, as they don’t inhale water, they close their blow hole and asphyxiate.

Although solutions exist, the mitigation efforts to date have only achieved small reductions in the numbers of porpoises killed. This is why we commissioned research into adjustments to fishing practices that meet the Fisheries Act’s objective to ‘minimise and, where possible, eliminate bycatch of sensitive species’.

National and devolved policy tools, such as the Joint Fisheries Statement and fishing licences, must be used to implement these measures. These need to be complemented with investment in increased management measures and independent at sea monitoring to track progress.

The UK’s departure from the EU and coronavirus both present serious challenges for fishers working in UK seas and, like other industries, fishers face hardship. This is an opportunity to create lasting, positive change that is an example for other countries to follow.

If we implement these recommendations, Government can take a step towards its objective and the UK can be a global fisheries leader. Effective delivery of the bycatch prevention requirements in the UK’s new Fisheries Act will afford UK fishing fleets a marketing advantage over neighbouring fishing industries who are yet to put in place meaningful measures to stop bycatch.
Gill nets are the highest risk gear category globally for cetacean and other sensitive species bycatch. There are also serious bycatch problems associated with trawl fisheries and with fisheries using pots and traps. The different characteristics of these gear types and the types and size of vessels involved, require different solutions.

**Gill Nets**

Acoustic deterrent devices (ADDs), such as ‘pingers’, have been shown to be effective at reducing harbour porpoise bycatch in gill nets, but the reduction achieved so far has been small, they may cause unwanted disturbance or displacement, are not always used properly and may not be effective for other species. Gill nets are a very small proportion of total UK fisheries (2% of value) but cause most of the cetacean bycatch. Hence there should be increased attention to moving away from gill nets towards alternative gears and, immediately, spatio-temporal measures. Funded trials are a practical step towards adopting alternative gears.

**Trawl Fisheries**

There is a very large bycatch problem for common dolphins associated with trawl fisheries in the Bay of Biscay. Although this is apparently occurring in adjacent rather than UK waters, adequate monitoring of similar trawl fisheries in UK waters is needed in order to enable a rapid response to indications of any changes in dolphin distribution or fishing effort that might result in similar bycatch, even for fisheries that currently appear to be lower risk. Mitigation plans that can be put into action as soon as there is any evidence that bycatch is occurring should be developed for all trawl fisheries that may pose a risk, together with adequate independent at sea monitoring. Such plans could include testing strategies such as a ‘moving on’ procedure, where fishing activity moves away from areas where bycatch is occurring or may occur.

**Pot & Creel Fisheries**

Pot and creel fisheries pose a particular entanglement risk to larger species such as minke and humpback whales. Unlike gill nets which are often designed to catch fish species of similar size to a small cetacean, entanglements in creel gear involve interactions with parts of the gear that are not related to catching the target species. Thus, there is much greater scope for technical modifications to creel gears to reduce entanglement risk without affecting the target catch than there is for other gears such as gill nets.
WE NEED CLEAR, AMBITIOUS ANNUAL TARGETS TO REDUCE DOLPHIN, PORPOISE AND WHALE BYCATCH EVERY YEAR UNTIL IT IS STOPPED.

GOODBYE BYCATCH

Please ask the fisheries minister to implement an action plan with targets and make the UK a global leader in tackling dolphin, porpoise and whale bycatch.

Contact: Sarah Dolman, WDC bycatch co-ordinator
sarah.dolman@whales.org | whales.org

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