

Cetacean bycatch and pelagic trawling

The problem of bycatch

The biggest threat to marine ecosystems globally is destructive and unsustainable fishing practices. An estimated 23% of the global fisheries catch is thrown back into the sea, dead and wasted. As well as over-fishing target fish stocks, fisheries are destroying the biodiversity of the oceans.

The loss of dolphin and porpoise populations are part of a global problem of "bycatch", or incidental capture, of non-target species such as mammals, birds, turtles, fish and other marine species in fisheries. It is estimated that over 300,000 whales, dolphins and porpoises (known collectively as cetaceans) are killed globally each year – asphyxiated after becoming entangled in fishing nets.

Every year in the UK and France hundreds of dolphins and porpoises are found washed up on beaches. Fragments of fishing nets, the stomach contents, and the injuries sustained by these creatures – broken beaks, torn flippers, bruising, lacerations, etc – tell the story of prolonged death in fishing nets. The cetaceans found on beaches are only a small proportion of the thousands actually killed – the bodies of others are claimed by the ocean, particularly as fishermen often puncture or slit the bodies in an attempt to sink them.

Conservative estimates indicate that over 10,000 cetaceans are being killed in fishing nets each year in the English Channel, Celtic Sea and Bay of Biscay alone. ASCOBANS (*the Agreement on the Conservation of Small Cetaceans of the Baltic and North Seas*) and the Scientific Committee of the IWC (*International Whaling Commission*) have stated that a loss of 1–1.7% of any cetacean population is serious cause for concern; the current estimated mortality rates of up to 6% for some areas far exceed sustainable levels.ⁱ

Pelagic trawling

Although all fishing methods result in some level of bycatch, the use of large nets cause the most damage to cetacean populations, with the pelagic, or mid-water, trawl nets the main culprits. These huge nets pulled by two vessels at once kill thousands of dolphins every year.

Pelagic trawl nets have a cone-shaped body with wings extending forward to funnel fish into the net. They are attached to one or two vessels by wire ropes or 'warps' and are towed at the appropriate level in the water column to intercept shoaling fish.

Since the 1970s, cetacean strandings (dead bodies washed ashore) have peaked each winter, coinciding with the activity of the pelagic trawl fisheries, which are mainly active in the winter months.ⁱⁱ High levels of common dolphin bycatch have been recorded in pelagic trawl fisheries, particularly the UK sea bass pair trawl fishery, but the limited monitoring of pelagic fisheries makes it very difficult to estimate the total bycatch. The scale of bycatch of the common dolphin in the UK sea bass fishery alone suggests that the total annual cetacean bycatch is well above sustainable levels.

EU bycatch policies

The UK Government and other EU states are obliged to protect dolphins and porpoises. Under the Habitats Directive the UK and other member states must monitor cetacean bycatch and ensure that fishing does not have a negative impact.

The European Commission adopted a new regulation in 2004 that attempts to tackle bycatch. The proposal however was weakened by pressure from fishing interests, and the resulting regulation has been criticised by conservation and welfare groups, and even the UK government for not going far enough. The regulation was proposed in 2003 after it was identified that EU member states had failed in their legal obligations to protect these dolphins and porpoises under the EU Habitats Directive

Whilst it is clear that this regulation itself will not eliminate the problem of bycatch, it is an important first step that the EU recognises the need to take action on this issue.

In particular Greenpeace warns that,

- The number of observers required to monitor fishing fleets believed to be responsible for dolphin deaths is too low
- The new legislation contains no clear commitment requiring action to stop deaths reported by these observers.
- There is too much reliance on acoustic deterrent devices (pingers) without sufficient monitoring to assess their effectiveness

Greenpeace demands that:

The EU should make a commitment to taking appropriate and immediate action on the fisheries identified as responsible for bycatch.

We also call on the EU to bring forward measures to use a reduction in fishing effort as a way of reducing bycatch (In the explanatory memorandum accompanying the draft Regulation, it is acknowledged that the most effective way to reduce bycatch is to reduce fishing effort. It is also recognised that a general reduction in fishing effort is likely to be crucial to future sustainable fisheries).

UK bycatch policies

The UK government has criticised the EU regulation for not going far enough. The UK government is also unique in having conclusive evidence from years of independent monitoring of a fishery that has unacceptable levels of cetacean bycatch: namely the pair trawling fishery for sea bass in the English Channel. This fishery is prosecuted by UK and French vessels, but until this year observation had only happened on the UK fleet. In the 2003/2004 season 169 common dolphins were observed killed as bycatch on UK bass pair trawlers. The estimated total for the UK fleet in that year was some 439 dolphins. The French fishery is believed to be responsible for 5/6 of this fishery – so the estimated total death toll on this dolphin population could be as high as 2,600 animals in a year.

As a result of this continuing death toll the UK government requested the closure of this fishery in 2004 under Emergency Measures from the EC. This request was denied.

The UK government subsequently brought in a ban on UK boats pair trawling for bass within 12 miles of the UK coast. – despite the fact that they were advised this could increase dolphin deaths by pushing trawling into areas where there are greater numbers of dolphins Nothing else was done.

In April of this year the European Commission requested an urgent scientific review of all available information on the north-east Atlantic population or sub populations of common dolphin, its bycatch and possible mitigation measures. The report found hard evidence to back up Greenpeace's case that the common dolphins in the English Channel and western approaches may form or be part of an separate sub-population of common dolphin.

On that basis the bycatch rate in the sea bass fishery of over 2,000 dolphins a year presents a clear and urgent threat to the common dolphin. There is ample evidence to show that the sea bass fishery is a major contributor to dolphin deaths, and that closing this fishery will mitigate the threat to the common dolphin. It will not simply lead to equally harmful fishing elsewhere, as the "do nothing" lobby suggests, although without being able to point to any plausible way in which this could happen). Greenpeace will be campaigning for the UK government and the Commission to take urgent action to close the sea bass fishery before the next season begins in November.

Greenpeace demands that:

The UK government bans all pair trawling for sea bass out to 200nm/the median.

References

ⁱ Ross A, Isaac S (2004). *The net effect? A review of cetacean bycatch in pelagic trawls and other fisheries in the north-east Atlantic*. London, UK: Greenpeace Environmental Trust.

ⁱⁱ Ross, A (2003). *Cetacean bycatch in pelagic trawl fisheries in the Celtic Sea, Biscay, Channel Area – A case for emergency action*. Working paper presented to the 10th Advisory Committee meeting of ASCOBANS, 9–11 April, Bonn, Germany. Document AC10/Doc.19 (O)