



Challenges and successes in attempts to reduce cetacean bycatch in UK waters

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Workshop: Tackling marine mammal bycatch challenges through different mitigation approaches in collaboration with stakeholders

OSPAR analysis for European waters

- Bycatch rates for just 2 cetacean species
- For both species, bycatch rates are exceeded



Bycaught harbour porpoise © C. Morris

Harbour porpoise		Threshold	Bycatch level
Greater North Sea	Exceeded	1622	5974
Irish & Celtic Seas	Exceeded	82	751
West of Scotland & Ireland	Exceeded	78	305
Iberian Peninsula	Not assessed, but critically exceeded	0	Unknown, but higher than 0
Common dolphin			
North East Atlantic	Significantly exceeded	985	6406

“Bycatch is occurring at high levels that do not align with the OSPAR Strategy of tackling biodiversity loss and of minimising and where possible eliminating bycatch” – OSPAR

In UK waters

Annual bycatch/entanglement estimates:

Static nets:

- ~865 harbour porpoises in 2021*
- 321 common dolphins in 2021

Creel pots:

- 6 humpback whales &
- 30 minke whales (Scottish waters only)



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References: Kingston et al., 2024; Leaper et al., 2022

* assuming full compliance by the relevant over 12m netting fleet with the ADD requirement (20 vessels) which there wasn't (Kingston et al., 2024)

Challenge: UK common dolphin bycatch

- Bycatch evidence of broken beaks in the 1990s
- UK pair trawling was banned in 2004
- Bycatch estimates for common dolphins have shown a clear upward trend in static net entanglements since 2014
- 82% bycatch now occurs in two metiers: tangle and trammel nets that target large fish (such as anglerfish, turbot and shellfish) and gillnets that target hake
- Declining viability of common dolphins in the Bay of Biscay, from strandings data, where female longevity declined dramatically from 24 to 17 years, corresponding to a 2.4% reduction in population growth rate



Challenge that bycatch remains high - measures were implemented for UK pair-trawls but bycatch shifted from one gear to another and remains high enough to contribute to population level impacts

Challenge: ADDs on >12m vessels

- In 2013, the UK mandated the use of ADDs/pingers on static nets operated by vessels over 12 metres in some areas, due to implementation of EU law (Regulation 2004/812)
- This measure applied to 20 vessels operating gillnets in 2021
- If fully complied with, an annual reduction in harbour porpoise bycatch of ~30%
- However, in 2021, seven at-sea inspections were conducted and one British vessel was issued a written warning for failure to use ADDs
- Therefore, enforcement and compliance are incomplete
- Almost 20,000 static net fishing operations (bycatch per haul) monitored between 1996 and 2023:
 - reducing harbour porpoise bycatch
 - no clear evidence that pingers reduced common dolphin bycatch
 - bycatch of pinnipeds increased

Challenge that mitigation measure applied is not appropriate for all species encountered. Further, this analysis took place 10 years after measure was first mandated



Success: Scottish creel entanglements

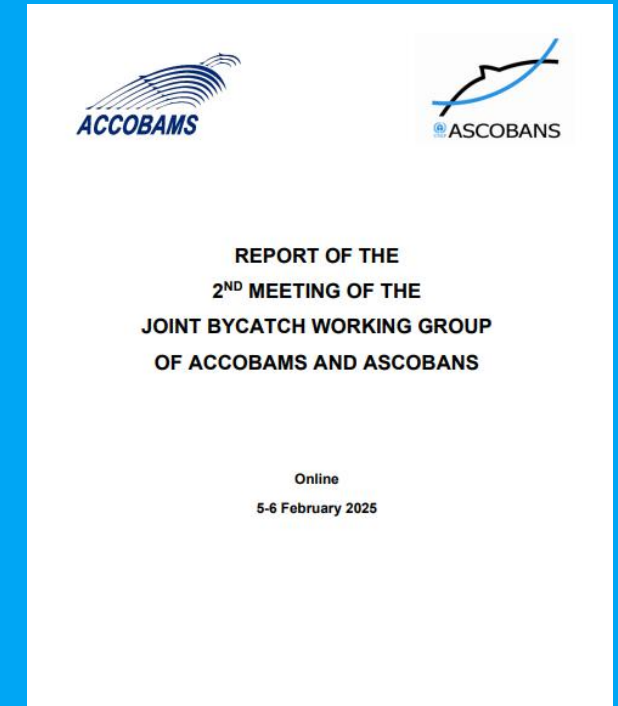
Scottish Entanglement Alliance formed in 2018: creel fisher interviews conducted
~ six humpback and 30 minke whales entangled annually - concerns about local population
83% MW, 50% HW entanglements in loops of floating rope in the ground lines between creels (pots)
Negatively buoyant groundlines reduce entanglement risk by removing these loops of rope
Generally, it's practical to fish with, and in some cases fishers preferred it. A few specific situations where it did not perform well
A successful, bottom-up partnership approach with Scottish creel fishers
Move towards fleet implementation in line with recommendations from IWC Scientific Committee



Some bycatch solutions

ASCOBANS & ACCOBAMS Bycatch Working Group report recommendations:

- National plans of action
- Increase monitoring:
 - small vessels
 - data poor species
- ICES special advice required for Iberian and Black Sea harbour porpoise
- Funding for mitigation & alternative gears
- Involvement of fishers for effective implementation



Available at:
<https://www.ascobans.org/>

Some bycatch solutions

In 2025, EIA released 'Catch of the Day: the deadly impacts of cetacean bycatch in European waters'

The report can be downloaded from the EIA website using this QR code:



UK bycatch solutions

Develop a **UK cetacean Bycatch Reduction Programme** and associated bycatch action plan (similar to ICES Special Advice), to include:

- Options for **alternative gear** use for static net fisheries, along with:
- Regulations and a plan for support to reduce / **phase out gillnets**,
- Roll-out **sinking groundlines** in the creel fishery within Scotland
- Work with fishers & stakeholders to develop implementation strategies
- Set **bycatch thresholds to achieve COs**, towards bycatch elimination
- Implement **mandatory monitoring** with observers and REM in high-risk fisheries, alongside implementation of bycatch measures
- Apply **ambitious timeframes** to achieve these bycatch requirements

Thank you

