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# CETACEAN BYCATCH AND THE IWC



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# BYCATCH IN FISHING OPERATIONS: THE GREATEST GLOBAL THREAT TO CETACEANS

► At the 2003 meeting of the International Whaling Commission Scientific Committee, scientists from the U.S. and the U.K. estimated global cetacean bycatch (the entanglement of cetaceans in fishing gear) at more than 300,000 mortalities annually. Although it has sometimes been difficult to draw attention to the magnitude of the problem, as an issue of population management and conservation, there is no intrinsic difference between bycatch and whaling. Both remove animals permanently from the wild population, and both require international action. For some populations that were the subject of whaling in the past, bycatch has simply replaced whaling as a mortality factor.

► Of the world's 86 currently recognized species of cetaceans, the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species classifies six species or populations as Critically Endangered, and at least one of these, the baiji, is in immediate danger of becoming the first cetacean species whose extinction was caused by humans. Another nine are considered Endangered. Of these fifteen, nine are threatened by fisheries bycatch.

► The World Conservation Union (IUCN) recognizes bycatch as one of the greatest threats to the survival of cetacean populations. Of the 57 research or education projects proposed as priorities in the IUCN Conservation Action Plan for the World's Cetaceans, at least 20 relate to bycatch, and more than half of the total are driven by concerns arising from the depletion of cetacean populations as a result of bycatch.

► Bycatch threatens both large whales and small cetaceans (dolphins and porpoises). Many populations of small cetaceans subject to bycatch inhabit the high seas beyond any coastal state's jurisdiction, or are trans-boundary stocks that require international cooperative management, yet international conservation of dolphins, porpoises, and other small cetaceans has received relatively little attention at the global level.

Humpback whale, *Megaptera novaeangliae*, male with tail trapped in net, and unable to swim.



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# SPECIES AND POPULATIONS AT RISK FROM BYCATCH

Cetacean bycatch is a worldwide problem, and is not limited to one ocean or a single fishing industry. Unfortunately we are likely to find this list growing in the near future, since some fishing methods and gears, such as pelagic trawl operations and many artisanal fisheries, have yet to be adequately analyzed for their impact on cetacean populations. Examples of cetacean species at risk from bycatch span the globe --

## South Pacific:

### *Cephalorhynchus hectori maui*, or Maui's dolphin:

- ▶ Extinction predicted within the next few decades unless gillnet fishing was substantially reduced; gillnetting now curtailed, but threats from illegal nets and trawling remain.
- ▶ Population numbers fewer than 100 animals.

## North America:

### *Eubalaena glacialis*, the North Atlantic right whale:

- ▶ One of the most endangered of all the large whales.
- ▶ Threats include entanglement in gillnets and lobster gear, and ship strikes.
- ▶ Only 300 to 350 individuals still exist; no sustained population growth apparent despite almost seven decades of protection.
- ▶ Many scientists believe them to be critically endangered.

### *Phocoena sinus*, the vaquita:

- ▶ Endemic to upper Gulf of California, Mexico.
- ▶ Population currently thought to number fewer than 600 and still declining.
- ▶ Killed in gillnets and trawl nets used in both artisanal and commercial fishing.

critically endangered

endangered

critically endangered



Hector's dolphin, *Cephalorhynchus hectori*, injured by entanglement in nylon fishing.

The Yangtze River dolphin, *Lipotes vexillifer*, the most endangered cetacean



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## Asia:

### ***Lipotes vexillifer*, the baiji or Yangtze River dolphin:**

- ▶ Found only in the Yangtze River and its tributaries in China.
- ▶ The world's most endangered cetacean; 1997 survey found only 13 animals.
- ▶ Likely that the total population numbers only in the tens.
- ▶ Damming of tributaries, dredging, and underwater blasting are causes of mortality along with entanglement in fishing gear.
- ▶ May very well be the first cetacean whose extinction is caused by humans.

critically endangered

### ***Neophocaena phocaenoides asiaorientalis*, the Yangtze River finless porpoise:**

- ▶ Inhabits the Yangtze River and adjacent lake systems.
- ▶ Recent estimates indicate abundance has declined considerably over the past two decades; now may be fewer than 2000 animals remaining.
- ▶ Extremely susceptible to entanglement in gillnets.

endangered

## Europe:

### ***Phocoena phocoena*, the harbour porpoise:**

- ▶ Severely threatened by bycatch in the Baltic and Black Seas.
- ▶ Many scientists believe them to be Endangered.
- ▶ European Commission has recently recognized the Baltic porpoise as the most critically endangered small cetacean population in Europe.
- ▶ Most recent survey of the Baltic population estimates as few as 93 animals remaining, down from 1995 estimated minimum of 599.
- ▶ Both bottom set gill nets and driftnets identified as major threats to survival

vulnerable

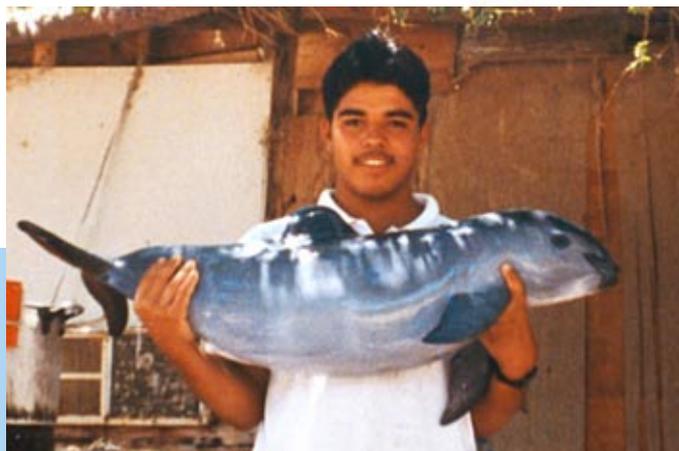
## South America:

### ***Pontoporia blainvillei*, the franciscana or La Plata dolphin:**

- ▶ Locally considered to be threatened.
- ▶ Found only in a narrow section of the coastal waters of Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay.
- ▶ Recent modeling indicates population off southern Brazil and Uruguay is declining due to bycatch, and may be at greater risk of extinction than any other cetacean species in the western South Atlantic.
- ▶ IWC Scientific Committee plans a review of this species at its 2004 meeting.

data deficient

Tangled vaquita, *Phocoena sinus*, in the Gulf of California



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# THE ROLE OF THE IWC IN ADDRESSING CETACEAN BYCATCH

The IWC Scientific Committee, through its Standing Sub Committee on Small Cetaceans, has consistently raised concerns regarding the conservation threats posed to cetaceans by incidental takes in fishing operations. Many of the Scientific Committee's concerns and recommendations have resulted in non-binding resolutions requesting action by Contracting Governments (Resolution 2001-13 on Small Cetaceans, Resolution 2001-4 on the Incidental Capture of Cetaceans, Resolution 2000-8 on Western North Atlantic Right Whales, Resolution 1997-4 on Cetacean Bycatch Reporting and Bycatch Reduction, Resolution 1992-7 on Small Cetaceans, Resolution 1991-4 on Small Cetaceans).

From the standpoint of population dynamics and management, there is no intrinsic difference between bycatch and whaling. Both remove animals permanently from the wild population. For some populations that were the subject of whaling in the past, bycatch has simply replaced whaling as a mortality factor (e.g. North Atlantic right whales, North Pacific minke whales). In this regard, bycatch is relevant to the issue of commercial whaling and the efforts of the IWC to regulate it, and has been incorporated into the IWC's Revised Management Procedure (RMP), by requiring that all non-natural mortalities such as bycatch and ship strikes be taken into account when estimating allowable catch levels. This approach requires that the IWC obtain the most accurate achievable data on levels of bycatch mortality, and WWF urges Contracting Governments to report all bycatch to assist the Scientific Committee in this effort.

However, the IWC's role in addressing bycatch should not be limited to reporting mortalities in the context of the RMP. The Contracting Governments of the IWC must recognize the important role the IWC can play in reducing this threat for both large and small cetaceans. Many populations of small cetaceans subject to bycatch inhabit the high seas beyond any coastal state's jurisdiction, or are trans-boundary stocks that require international cooperative management. The IWC is globally recognized as the competent international body for management of whales, and its Scientific Committee comprises the greatest single annual gathering of cetacean scientists in the world. Harnessing this combination to focus on bycatch has the potential for huge strides forward in mitigating this critical conservation problem. Experience indicates that appropriate regulatory efforts established in cooperation with fishing interests can often effectively reduce cetacean bycatch to sustainable levels while allowing fishing to continue. Unfortunately, unless international bodies such as the IWC act soon, assistance may come too late for many species and populations.



Minke whales, *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*, are also often victims of fishing nets

# A WWF CALL TO ACTION

In January of 2002 WWF sponsored an International Workshop on Reducing Cetacean Bycatch, bringing together cetacean and fisheries experts from six continents in an effort to address this growing concern. The workshop agreed on an International Call to Action.

With this in mind, WWF calls on the governments of the IWC to –

## International call to action on cetacean bycatch

- ▶ A coordinated global effort must be made to address cetacean bycatch globally.
- ▶ Direct involvement of the fishing industry in reducing cetacean bycatch is essential.
- ▶ Scientists, the fishing industry, NGOs and managers must work together to reduce bycatch.
- ▶ In some regions bycaught cetaceans are increasingly being utilized for human consumption – those situations must be identified and impacts assessed.
- ▶ Better data are needed on cetacean populations and bycatch levels worldwide.
- ▶ Clear, agreed, balanced objectives are needed for reducing bycatch.

- 1. Adhere to IWC Resolution 2001-4, which “recommends that all Contracting Parties make reasonable attempts to release alive, with the minimum harm possible, whales that have been incidentally captured” and “if the whale cannot be released alive, recommends that there shall be no commercial exchange of incidentally-captured whales for which no catch limit has been set by the Commission.”**

WWF particularly urges the Government of Japan to adhere to this recommendation in the case of incidentally-caught minke whales from the endangered J stock, and the Home Rule Government of Greenland to adhere to this recommendation in the case of incidentally-caught endangered humpback and bowhead whales.

- 2. Adhere to IWC Resolution 2001-13, which “urges contracting governments to take all appropriate measures to prevent, minimize, and mitigate by-catch of small cetaceans in fisheries operations” and “urges the IWC under its Memorandum of Understanding with the Convention on Migratory Species to pursue complementary and mutually supportive actions in respect of small cetaceans.”**

More than any other international organization, the IWC has the potential to play a strong conservation role in this issue. We urge the governments of the IWC to fulfill that potential by contributing to the IWC Small Cetaceans Fund and through the development of IWC-sponsored workshops to address specific concerns or stocks as recommended by the Scientific Committee, particularly in developing nations.

Hector's dolphin, *Cephalorhynchus hectori*,  
Banks Peninsula, New Zealand





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WWF's mission is to stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature, by:

- conserving the world's biological diversity
- ensuring that the use of renewable natural resources is sustainable
- promoting the reduction of pollution and wasteful consumption.

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