Wildlife and Countryside LINK

Hidden in the haul

The true scale of bycatch

Contents

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Wildlife and Countryside Link
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Executive summary

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Annually, thousands of animals are being killed when incidentally caught by fishing in UK waters. This incidental catching is known as bycatch. For the first time, we have collated UK data across species demonstrating that every year fishing boats are catching:

- Over 10,000 seabirds
- Over 1,000 cetaceans, including harbour porpoises, common dolphins, and humpback and minke whales
- Around 500 seals
- Over 120 tonnes of protected sharks, skates and rays
- Over 1,000 endangered Atlantic salmon

Whilst shocking, these figures are likely just the tip of the iceberg due to a severe lack of monitoring, reporting and recording. Nonetheless, there is clear evidence that bycatch is causing enormous amounts of suffering to individual animals and depleting UK populations of these precious species, threatening their survival. This depletion of marine wildlife is affecting our ability to recover our ocean and the UK Government's ability to meet the legal requirement to reach Good Environmental Status for UK seas.

Progress to reduce, and ultimately eliminate, bycatch is far too slow. In many cases we have known about the impact of bycatch for decades and deaths have stayed stubbornly high.

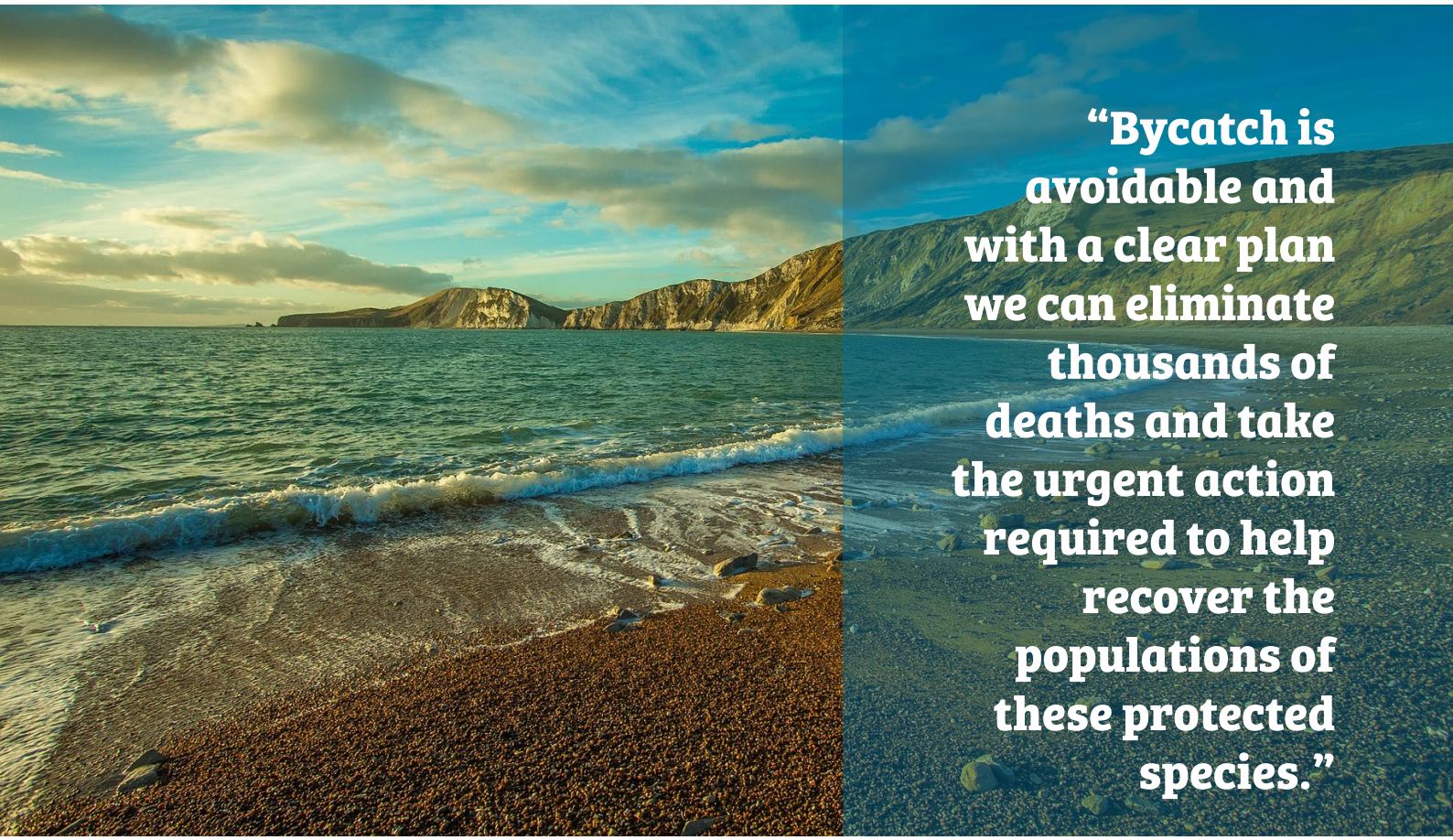
The UK Government needs to **deliver**

promised Bycatch Action Plans for these species with quantitative, time-bound bycatch reduction targets and clear commitments to fisheries management measures to meet these targets. Alongside these plans, the UK Government must **require remote electronic monitoring (REM) on all fishing boats in English waters**, including smaller under-10m boats that are responsible for a large proportion of bycatch. This will finally reveal the true scale of bycatch and monitor whether bycatch mitigation measures are working. Similar recommendations are largely applicable to the devolved governments as bycatch occurs across UK waters.

Beyond these broad recommendations, more specific, species-focused measures are required. These include:

- Applying effective mitigation measures to the entire fleet of boats fishing with high-risk gears. This includes static nets which have a high level of bycatch of species including seabirds, cetaceans, seals and Atlantic salmon. In the long term, static fishing nets should be phased out in favour of lower impact fishing gears.
- Improving bycatch reporting for sharks, skates and rays by enforcing compliance with existing fisheries discard reporting regulations, including through effective use of REM.
- Taking bycatch of protected species as a material consideration in all relevant Fisheries Management Plans.

Bycatch is avoidable and with a clear plan we can eliminate thousands of deaths and take the urgent action required to help recover the populations of these protected species.



Introduction

Every year thousands of animals, from seals and dolphins, to sharks, seabirds, and rare fish, are caught and killed by fishing in UK waters. This incidental catching of sensitive wildlife when fishing is called "bycatch".

Bycatch occurs because modern fishing gear often does not discriminate between the fish people are trying to catch and other wildlife. Nets dragged through the water or along the seafloor sweep up everything in their path that is too big to pass through the mesh. Static nets, that hang like a curtain in the water or like a rug on the seabed, snag seabirds, porpoises, seals and protected fish species as well as fish for people to eat. Long lines of hooks can equally catch endangered sharks and birds as they can target fish.

The species sections of this report evidence that, for some animals, bycatch is at such high levels it is depleting local or regional populations and could contribute to iconic and much-loved animals disappearing from our seas. Bycatch is also an animal welfare concern, causing thousands of animals to suffer unnecessarily. Animals caught in nets experience a painful, stressful death as they struggle to free themselves.

This report brings together best estimates of annual UK bycatch across a wide range of species for the first time to demonstrate the staggering and shocking scale of the problem and delivers general recommendations for reducing bycatch. Individual sections cover the effects of bycatch, and recommendations for reducing bycatch, for each of these specific groups: seabirds; cetaceans; seals; sharks, skates and rays; and salmon.

The report concludes with the essential actions needed by the UK Government to tackle bycatch.

The scale of bycatch

The below table sets out best estimates of annual UK bycatch given current available data.

ANNUAL BYCATCH ESTIMATES	
Species group	**Estimate of UK bycatch**
Seabirds	Over 10,000 individuals per year in UK waters
Cetaceans *Harbour porpoises and common dolphins*	Over 1,000 individuals per year in UK waters
Humpback whales	Approximately 6 individuals per year (estimate applies to Scottish creel fishery only)
Minke whales	Approximately 30 individuals per year (estimate applies to Scottish creel fishery only)
Seals	Approximately 500 individuals per year in UK waters
Sharks, skates and rays (elasmobranchs)	Over 120 tonnes of blue skate, porbeagle, and white skate per year in UK waters
Atlantic salmon	Over 1,000 individuals per year by UK boats in the north east mackerel fishery; and one salmon caught per 1.25km of coastal gillnet

The figures demonstrate the huge scale on which much-loved species are being caught in fishing gear. All species listed in the table are protected species making it illegal to target them in commercial fishing but which are being caught and killed incidentally. For some species, data on bycatch in UK waters goes back several decades, with a huge cumulative total loss of individuals and no clear decrease in deaths during that time.[1]

Yet these figures are likely to underestimate bycatch due to a severe lack of monitoring, reporting and recording. Current government led bycatch monitoring programmes of British boats have only achieved average annual monitoring coverage of days at sea of 2.4% for midwater trawl fishing, 1.2% for static net fishing, 0.7% for seabed trawl fishing, 0.1% for hook and line fishing, 0.05% for dredging, and <0.01% for trap fishing.[2] This means a significant amount of bycatch is missed. In addition, existing monitoring programmes only cover UK registered vessels, meaning estimates do not include bycatch by foreign vessels fishing in UK waters.

All fishers catching in UK waters are required by law to report marine mammal bycatch to the Marine Management Organisation, which should contribute to data on bycatch. However, a freedom of information request revealed that since 2021, when this requirement started, fishers have reported only 9 marine mammals as bycaught. Given the thousands of marine mammals estimated to have been bycaught in the 5 years since the requirement, alongside the numbers confirmed as bycaught by post-mortem examination by strandings networks (see Box Two), it is clear that reports by fishers do not begin to accurately reflect actual levels of bycatch. This extreme level of under-reporting shows self-reporting cannot be relied on to inform management, as it does not provide an effective way of monitoring.

The data we do have are shocking and clearly present an urgent case for tackling bycatch as a huge conservation and welfare priority. The effects on the populations and welfare of individual species are further explored in the species sections.

Key recommendations

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Fisheries management is a devolved responsibility. The recommendations throughout the report are primarily targeted at the UK Government's bycatch policies for England (unless otherwise specified), drawing on the expertise of Wildlife and Countryside Link's primarily England-based members. However, similar recommendations are largely applicable to the devolved Governments as bycatch occurs across UK waters.

1 Deliver Bycatch Action Plans with quantitative, time-bound bycatch reduction targets.

The UK already has laws in place requiring reduction or elimination of bycatch. The Fisheries Act 2020 requires the UK and devolved governments to set out policies to minimise and, where possible, eliminate incidental catches of sensitive species. The Marine Strategy Regulations 2010 require the UK and devolved governments to take action to achieve or maintain Good Environmental Status (GES) for UK waters by 2020. As Government reports show, bycatch is preventing GES being reached.[3]

Failure to achieve GES, including due to bycatch, led the Office for Environmental Protection to identify potential failures to comply with environmental law. They put these failures to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) in an information notice.[4] We await the response to this notice.

The legislative requirements to reduce bycatch are therefore in place, the priority should be implementation of policies to meet these requirements.

In 2023, a Parliamentary report released by the UK House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee recommended Defra publish an action plan to reduce bycatch, with targets and timelines, by the end of 2023.[5] The UK government stated in response that Defra would develop a plan specifically for England by 2024.[6] However, no plan yet exists. The UK and devolved governments did publish the **marine wildlife bycatch mitigation initiative** in 2022. However, this did not contain any quantified or time bound commitments, either for achieving a reduction in bycatch or for putting in place policies to achieve that reduction.

Quantified, time-bound commitments for bycatch reduction of all the species covered in this report should be put in place as part of species-focused Bycatch Action Plans by the end of 2027. These should be backed up in the Bycatch Action Plans by fisheries management measures necessary to reduce bycatch in line with the commitments. These should be evidence-based and carefully-monitored management measures to address bycatch across a wide range of species, applied fleet wide.

The goal of reducing bycatch towards zero is something that is realistic to achieve for the UK, but we need widespread effective action on bycatch, not existing small-scale trials. Implementation will require bycatch policy and associated fisheries management to be properly resourced within Defra and Defra's arms-length bodies. Resource is needed for additional staff in Defra and the statutory nature conservation bodies to deliver evidence-based Bycatch Action Plans and for management measures to be properly enforced by Defra's arms-length bodies. It is vital that there is joint working between fisheries and environment teams in Defra to ensure effective implementation.

2 Require remote electronic monitoring (REM) on all fishing boats in English waters, including under-10m vessels.

The data we have on the scale of bycatch is already evidence of the need to reduce and eliminate bycatch to protect sensitive species. For some species, this evidence stretches back decades, with a report from the UK and devolved governments in 2003 already setting out the need to reduce bycatch for harbour porpoise and common dolphin.[7]

While mitigation actions should be prioritised as a first step, our understanding of bycatch is still based on monitoring stranded animals and a very small sample of the UK fleet, often on volunteer boats, and completely ignores fishing by foreign boats in UK waters. This leaves us unable to understand the full impact and urgency of bycatch, where to target management measures, and whether those management measures that have been, or will be, put in place actually do reduce bycatch.

REM systems combine GPS, video and gear sensor technology to monitor fishing activity, including bycatch, without the need for human observers on boats. With REM, checks can be targeted to fishing methods, areas and times we know have the highest risk of bycatch, as well as fisheries with management measures in place.

The UK Government is currently planning to require REM in English waters for a select number of fisheries and only for boats over 10m. However, smaller boats are responsible for most static net fishing in English waters.[8] This type of fishing has a very high risk of bycatch. REM must therefore be mandated for all boats, including those under 10m to ensure boats with the highest risk of bycatch are included.

The UK Government is also following a voluntary-led approach, meaning despite the rollout beginning in 2024, no fishery is yet required to have REM and only one boat has had REM tested on board through the Government programme. REM is no longer a novel or untested technology; it has already been successfully implemented and made mandatory across scallop dredgers and the pelagic trawl fleet in Scotland. The rollout must be sped up with mandatory requirements for REM where volunteers are not forthcoming.

Species spotlight
Seabirds

Headline estimate for seabirds

Over 10,000 seabirds per year bycaught in UK waters
Northridge et al 2020

Recommendations

- Deliver and implement a Seabird Bycatch Mitigation Action Plan with tangible, measurable and timebound actions to prevent seabird bycatch, which should include:
  - » Mitigation measures to tackle bycatch in static net fisheries, including research into alternative gear to replace gillnets, or where mitigation is successful, expanding this fleet wide.
  - » REM rollout across all vessels operating in UK waters to properly assess the scale of seabird bycatch.

Seabirds are the most threatened group of birds in the world,[9] and in the UK 62% of seabird species are declining.[10] These declines are caused by multiple threats.

Bycatch is among the top three threats to seabirds globally and it is a key human pressure on UK seabird populations.[11] Bycatch also causes seabirds considerable suffering through death by drowning. When assessing just two of the 25 UK seabird species, we are losing up to 12,400 seabirds per year.[12]

The figures we have likely underestimate the true impact of seabird bycatch. First, monitoring only covers UK-registered vessels, so mortalities caused by non-UK vessels fishing in UK waters are not reflected. Second, as with sensitive species bycatch in general, the current Bycatch Monitoring Programme, which uses human observers, only achieves very limited coverage of total fishing effort.[13]

Worryingly, the Government's own strategy for improving the state of our marine environment has so far failed to include an assessment of the impact of seabird bycatch because the data are so poor.[14] This is despite the fact that addressing seabird bycatch is necessary to achieve the UK Government's legislative requirement to reach GES for UK seas by 2020.[15] Increasing monitoring is a crucial step in achieving this.

In English waters, gillnets are the highest risk gear for seabird bycatch. Gillnets are a type of static net that use a curtain of netting that hangs in the water either at the sea surface (drift gillnets) or near the seabed (bottom set gillnets) to catch fish around the gills. Seabirds are generally caught in them when they dive for food. Globally, it is estimated that gillnet fisheries are responsible for over 400,000 seabird deaths each year.[16] Gillnetting is widespread across multiple areas off the English coast yet there are currently no mandatory measures in place to mitigate seabird bycatch in this high-risk gear type.

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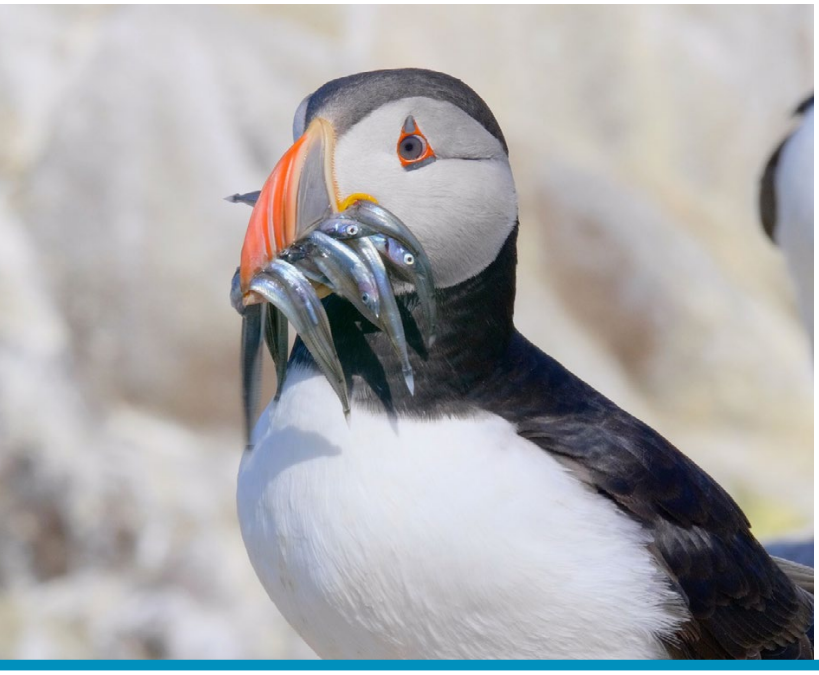
The England Seabird Bycatch Mitigation Action Plan must contain tangible, measurable and timebound actions to tackle seabird bycatch, especially for gillnets. These actions must be properly resourced, effectively implemented, and monitored and assessed over time to ensure they are leading to genuine reductions in seabird bycatch. This needs to take place hand in hand with the roll out of REM with cameras across all vessels operating in UK waters to properly assess seabird bycatch impacts and the effectiveness of any future mitigation measures. Progress on both fronts is crucial if the Government is to make good on its statutory obligations under the Marine Strategy Regulations 2010.

Case study

Filey Bay in Yorkshire is home to a small-scale inshore fishery targeting sea trout. Three miles away, the 400ft-high Bempton Cliffs are home to approximately 500,000 seabirds including gannets, puffins, guillemots, razorbills, and kittiwakes.

It is the largest mainland colony of seabirds in the UK. Razorbills and guillemots also now nest in cliffs above Filey Brigg. The proximity of these two seabird colonies to Filey's key fishing areas led to increased instances of seabird mortality due to entanglement in gillnets. Since 2010, the Filey fishery has worked closely with the RSPB, trialling innovative methods of bycatch mitigation and sharing best practice with international partners.



Using a combination of mitigation measures, including net attendance and the adoption of heavier nets, fishers in Filey Bay achieved a reduction from approximately 700 seabird deaths per year to just 4-5.[17] This shows how effective tangible action to reduce seabird bycatch can be and similar action must be taken across gillnet fisheries in English waters.

Species spotlight
Cetaceans

Headline estimate for cetaceans (dolphins, porpoises and whales)

Over 1,000 harbour porpoises and common dolphins per year bycaught in UK static nets in UK waters
UK Bycatch Monitoring Programme

Approximately 6 humpback whales and 30 minke whales bycaught per year in creel ropes in Scottish waters
Leaper et al 2022

Recommendations

- Deliver and implement a Cetacean Bycatch Mitigation Action Plan with tangible, measurable and timebound actions to prevent cetacean bycatch, which should include:
  - » Precautionary thresholds for maximum levels of bycatch, aiming for bycatch elimination, ensuring no population level impacts for any protected species, including from cumulative threats of bycatch and other pressures.
  - » Introduction of fisheries management to reduce and eliminate bycatch, and incentives to urgently phase out high-risk static net types in favour of alternative gears.
  - » Moving from small scale trials to implementation of effective bycatch prevention measures across the high-risk fleets.

For decades, cetacean bycatch in UK fisheries has contributed to population declines for harbour porpoises, common dolphins, minke whales and potentially other cetacean species that are too poorly monitored to allow bycatch assessment, as well as causing intense suffering.

OSPAR (the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic) calculated bycatch thresholds for harbour porpoises in static nets in the seas around the UK. Above these thresholds, it is estimated that bycatch will cause declines in cetacean populations. These thresholds have all been exceeded.[18] Harbour porpoise bycatch estimates in the Greater North Sea and Irish and Celtic Seas, both of which overlap with UK waters, exceed these thresholds by 3.7 times and almost 10 times, respectively.[19] ICES (International Council for the Exploration of the Sea) reported that harbour porpoise bycatch levels on the Celtic shelf may pose a conservation risk as far back as 2014.[20] The level of entanglement of minke whales in Scottish waters suggests a risk of localised depletion.[21] ASCOBANS has also long documented the issue of harbour porpoise bycatch in European waters as a critical conservation issue and found that bycatch exceeds thresholds for population effects.[22]

Static nets are responsible for the majority of marine mammal bycatch deaths in UK waters, mainly in English and Welsh waters. Bycaught cetaceans typically asphyxiate in the net as they are trapped underwater.[23, 24] Asphyxiation is likely to be a protracted process and cause extreme suffering.[25, 26]

Current UK mitigation measures require about 20 large fishing vessels (over 12 metres) using static nets to use acoustic deterrent devices in some regions of UK seas, to alert and keep cetaceans out of nets. However, a recent study has confirmed that although these specific devices reduce the number of porpoises that die in nets, they increase the number of seals that die and their effectiveness cannot be determined for common dolphins, and bycatch of common dolphins is increasing.[27] Further, compliance is not 100%.[28]

Static nets encompass a relatively small percentage of overall fishing effort,[29] but cause most of the bycatch.[30] The Marine Management Organisation is currently considering fisheries management measures for

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harbour porpoise Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). As Wildlife and Countryside Link recommended in our response to the call for evidence, in the long term a shift away from high-risk static nets is required, to the use of alternative gears that minimise bycatch across all protected species.[31] Recent research shows that many fishers are willing to trial alternative gears, but require government support to do so.[32]

Fisheries management measures should bring bycatch of cetaceans well below thresholds for population impacts, aiming for zero bycatch in line with legal requirements in the Fisheries Act 2020 to minimise and, where possible, eliminate bycatch.

Case study

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Minke whales, humpback whales, other cetacean species and basking sharks can become entangled in creel (fishing pot) ropes. The Scottish Entanglement Alliance was formed in 2018 to investigate large marine animal entanglements and is made up of a coalition of the Scottish Creel Fishermen's Federation, scientists and conservation and welfare charities. Interviews conducted with creel fishers found that the majority of the entanglements (83% of minke whales and 50% of humpback whales) occurred in loops of floating rope in the ground lines between creels.

Early trials of weighted ropes have been successful and welcomed by those fishers in the handful of vessels currently using them. This simple option has the potential to greatly reduce entanglement risk and demonstrates a successful, bottom-up, partnership approach with Scottish creel fishers.[33] Weighted ropes should be rolled out fleet-wide with government support via a universal subsidy that incentivises uptake, enabling creel fishers to undertake a timely transition voluntarily.

Box One

Bycatch in non-UK waters in the UK supply chain

With approximately 90% of seafood eaten in the UK imported, the UK not only faces growing exposure to market volatility and supply chain disruption, but also relies on environmental protections beyond its borders to maintain high standards for fish consumed in the UK.[34]

The UK therefore has a dual responsibility: as a fishing nation, we must reduce bycatch in domestic waters; and as a major seafood market, we must ensure imported products meet minimum standards for wildlife protection. The UK is well placed to lead globally on ecosystem-based fisheries management, establishing higher standards for other countries to follow.

The scale of the UK's market influence and environmental impact is significant. The UK consumes approximately 887,000 tonnes of seafood a year. Within fisheries supplying the UK at least 253 endangered, threatened and protected species have been recorded as bycaught, and fishing and aquaculture (fish farms) supplying the UK overlaps with important natural habitats of 528 species.[35] These figures are likely an underestimate due to inconsistent monitoring and limited coverage where monitoring is in place.

Certain fishing gears used within UK supply chains pose particularly high risks. Gillnets used to catch commonly consumed species such as haddock and tuna are associated with high bycatch of small cetaceans,[36] while longline tuna fisheries threaten seabirds and sharks, skates and rays.[37] These pressures reduce ecosystem resilience by removing key species and disrupting food webs, not only killing sensitive species but undermining fish stocks for the future.

Retailers and suppliers increasingly rely on sustainability certification (20% of global fisheries engage with certification schemes like MSC) but certification reduces rather than eliminates bycatch risk. Voluntary action has helped drive progress, but meaningful reductions in bycatch require policy intervention.

To protect sensitive species internationally and secure resilient seafood supply chains, the UK Government should:

- Create minimum standards for bycatch mitigation for imported seafood through trade regulations.
- Fund innovation and uptake of effective mitigation technologies in countries with fewer resources.
- Mandate REM across all gear types and vessel sizes in the UK supply chain.
- Expand research into interactions between sensitive species and fishing gear.

In an example of existing supply chain bycatch policy, the UK must meet requirements for bycatch standards in fish products that are exported to the US due to the US Marine Mammal Protection Act. Part of the requirements are marine mammal bycatch reporting requirements. The UK currently relies on fishers self-reporting bycatch to meet these requirements. As demonstrated in this report and elsewhere, these requirements are not being met.[38] Non-compliance with the US Act by other countries has led to imports to the US being banned in the past, a risk facing the UK if action is not taken on bycatch.[39]

Species spotlight
Seals

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Headline estimate for seals

Approximately 500 seals per year bycaught in UK waters
UK Bycatch Monitoring Programme

Recommendations

- Deliver and implement a Seal Bycatch Mitigation Action Plan with tangible, measurable and timebound actions to prevent seal bycatch, which should include:
  - » Remote electronic monitoring (REM) rollout across all vessels operating in UK waters, including boats under 10m. Maintain and update the UK Bycatch Monitoring Programme until mandatory REM is fully in place.
  - » Fisheries management measures and financial incentives to require a shift away from high-risk static nets (especially tangle and trammel nets).
  - » Measures requiring all UK ports and harbours to provide free, standardised deposit areas for waste fishing gear and fishers to mark their gear to reduce entanglement in lost and discarded fishing gear. Evidence of responsible gear disposal should also be required before being able to purchase new gear.

Seals face a range of threats in the UK. These include overfishing leading to depletion of prey fish stocks, climate change, habitat loss, disturbance, toxic chemical pollutants, and historically shooting and culling.[40, 41, 42, 43, 44] High levels of fatal bycatch, alongside live entanglement in lost and discarded fishing gear,[45] combine with these threats to pose a significant risk to seal populations, with bycatch listed as one of the top pressures on seals by the UK Government.[46]

UK fatal seal bycatch

An estimated 70% to 85% of seal bycatch occurs in the south west of the UK and most bycaught seals are young grey seals who are still learning how to feed.[47, 48] The summer foraging season is when grey seals are most at risk from threats at sea (e.g. bycatch) as this is when seals spend most time offshore feeding.

Estimates exclude bycatch by non-UK vessels in UK waters and are based on monitoring of 1% of static net effort. This reinforces the need to rollout REM to all fishing boats operating in UK waters, including boats under 10m, to establish a full picture of UK seal bycatch. This could include attaching underwater cameras to affected nets to accurately understand the levels and process of seal interaction with fishing gear.

As with cetaceans and seabirds, seal bycatch occurs mostly in static (specifically tangle and trammel) nets, amounting to over 90% of all seal bycatch.[49] The simplest solution is therefore for the UK Government to require fishers to transition away from static net use to other, lower-risk gears and provide support for them to do so. This would provide benefits across a wide range of species. By contrast, technological solutions, such as some acoustic deterrent devices in some cases can decrease bycatch for one species, like harbour porpoise, while increasing it for seals.

Live seal entanglement

In addition to fatal bycatch, some seals that become entangled in fishing gear may not immediately die. This often occurs when fishing gear is lost or discarded at sea, rather than as bycatch during active fishing. This results in huge suffering, often followed by premature death.

The Seal Research Trust have photographic records of entangled seals with robust data from across the south west of England since 2011. Between 2 and 4% of all live seals observed have shown evidence of entanglement with a maximum of 134 different seals observed entangled in 2021. Individual seals have been recorded suffering from entanglement for least 7 years. Groundswells associated with more storms due to climate changing are increasing lost gear adding to already very high entanglement rates.[50] Lost gear is also a risk to many other species.[51]

Many ports and harbours do not provide free disposal of lost, end-of-life or offcut fishing gear.[52] This both encourages improper disposal at sea and disincentives the

“Between 2 and 4% of all live seals have shown evidence of entanglement.”

returning to shore of waste fishing gear accidentally brought up by fishers. All UK ports and harbours must provide free, standardised waste reception facilities to reduce cost and logistical barriers to proper disposal of fishing gear. Gear should also be required to be marked with the fisher’s details to incentivise proper disposal. Evidence of responsible gear disposal should be required before being able to purchase new gear.

Case study

‘Legs’ is an adult female grey seal in Cornwall who graphically illustrates the dire welfare consequences of live entanglement in fishing gear.

In January 2019 she was recorded as entangled in a single encircling mesh of monofilament fishing net. This net began cutting into the flesh of her neck and by 2020 a golf ball-sized swelling developed. By 2021 the net was no longer visible as skin had likely grown over it.

Miraculously, in 2022 Legs had a pup but in 2025 a large open wound developed around her neck. She then experienced repeated and violent neck spasms considered by vets to be a neurological response to pain.

Whilst the wound appeared to have healed in 2026, Legs remains entangled over 7 years later. Unfortunately, Legs is rarely at a safe rescue location so cannot be disentangled by rescue organisations. She is just one of many seals experiencing years of entanglement.

Box Two

Marine mammal bycatch and strandings data for Cornwall

The Cornwall Wildlife Trust Marine Strandings Network started in the winter of 1992/93 when 123 dolphins washed up dead (stranded) around the Cornish coast in three months. Bycatch from the bass pair trawl fishery was a prime suspect in these strandings and the records helped change fisheries management. EU regulations implemented in 2004 specified compulsory use of acoustic deterrent devices on some vessels and an observer scheme to monitor bycatch. The UK government followed soon after with a ban on UK bass pair trawl fishery within 12 nautical miles of the English coast.

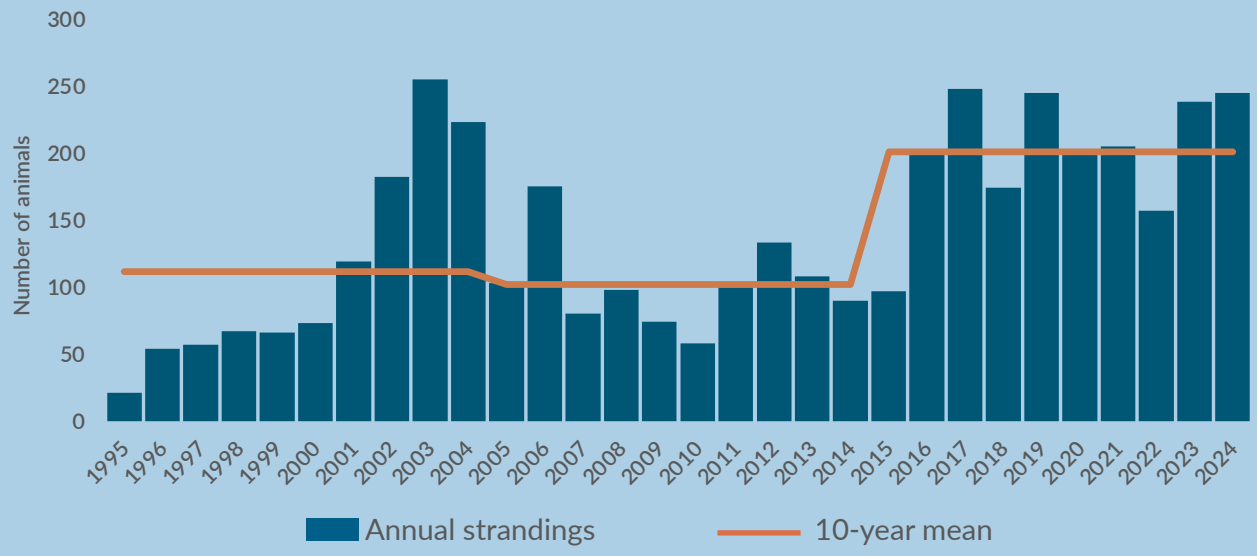
The Marine Strandings Network continues to train volunteers and document marine strandings for a variety of marine life, making it a strong source of data for estimating bycatch trends over time. There is a strandings hotline number (staffed by volunteers) which coordinates a network of over 300 trained volunteers around the Cornish coast.

Documented cetacean strandings peaked in 2003 at 252 and declined after the pair trawl ban. However, in the last ten years numbers have risen again averaging 201 cetaceans a year (double the average of the preceding decade which was 102 per year, see Figure 1). An increase in common dolphin deaths in the last decade is thought to be associated with static nets, as well as changes in the distribution of these animals. A change in the post-mortem injuries suffered, from broken beaks damaged in trawl nets to injuries more consistent with static nets, supports this.

Some cases (on average 17%) can be retrieved for post-mortem examination, but this is only a small proportion. Therefore, the cetacean Bycatch Evidence Evaluation Protocol (BEEP) was developed in 2007. Marine Strandings Network volunteers thoroughly photograph all aspects of the stranding to document all external features. These are then assessed by experience verifiers for features diagnostic of bycatch.

On average around 72% of cetaceans can be assessed either by post-mortem or BEEP. Of those assessed on average 24% show definite or highly probably evidence of having been bycaught in live fishing activity or entangled in lost fishing gear. This percentage is relatively stable overtime, meaning as strandings have increased, bycatch is also likely to be increasing.

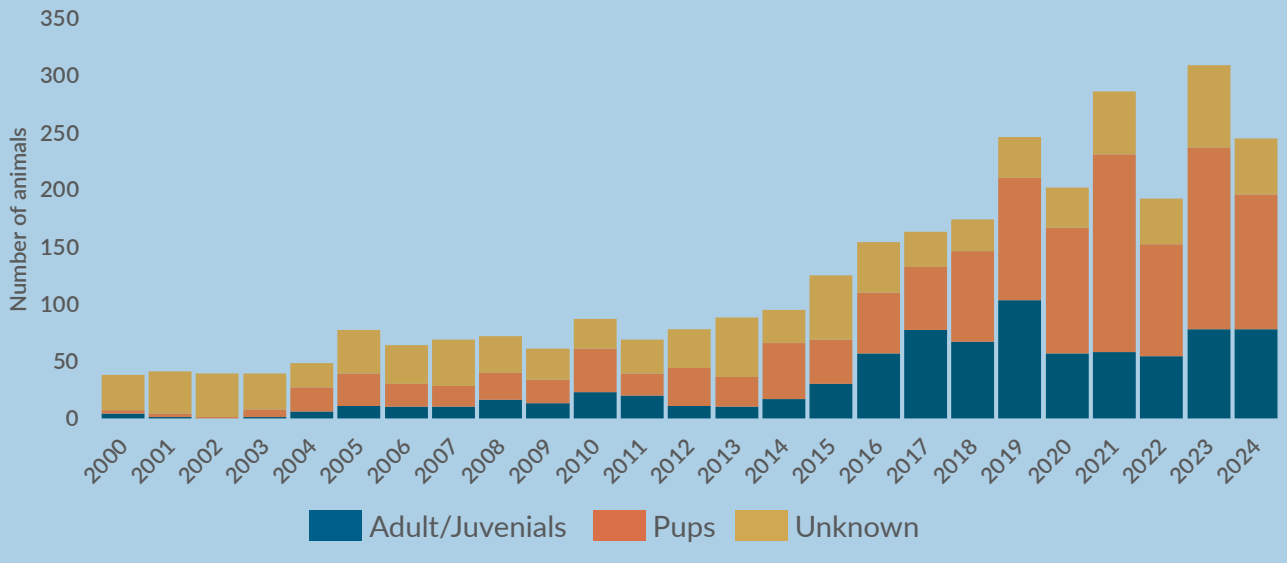
Figure 1 Cetacean strandings for Cornwall since 1995



Reported seal strandings have also increased over time (see Figure 2). The vulnerability of seal pups born just prior to the autumn storms means that the majority of strandings are pups in the first few months of life.

The Cetacean Strandings Investigation Programme has only had funding for seal post mortems since 2022. Before this, many of the necropsies were carried out by the then voluntary Cornwall Marine Pathology Team for rescue organisations after pups had either died or had to be euthanised in the early stages of rehabilitation. Therefore, the data on seal postmortems is heavily biased towards very young animals usually suffering from malnutrition or infection from injuries, making estimates on bycatch trends difficult. However, on average 10% of all seal post mortem cases per year show evidence of having been bycaught, and a higher proportion (17%) of the 48 adult and juvenile seals undergoing necropsies between 2010 and 2024 were deemed bycaught.

Figure 2 Seal strandings in Cornwall by age



Species spotlight

Sharks, skates and rays

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Headline estimate for sharks, skates and rays (elasmobranchs)

Between 2020 and 2024, over 120 tonnes of Blue Skate, Porbeagle, and White Skate were bycaught and discarded per year in UK waters

Fisheries discard data from 2020-2024 held by the Marine Management Organisation

Recommendations

- Deliver and implement a Sharks, Skates and Rays Bycatch Mitigation Action Plan with tangible, measurable and timebound actions to prevent shark, skate and ray bycatch, which should include:
  - » Improving sharks, skates and rays species specific bycatch reporting by enforcing compliance with existing fisheries discard reporting regulations.
  - » Increasing the profile of sharks, skates and rays in UK Government bycatch reporting projects, such as the UK Bycatch Monitoring Programme.

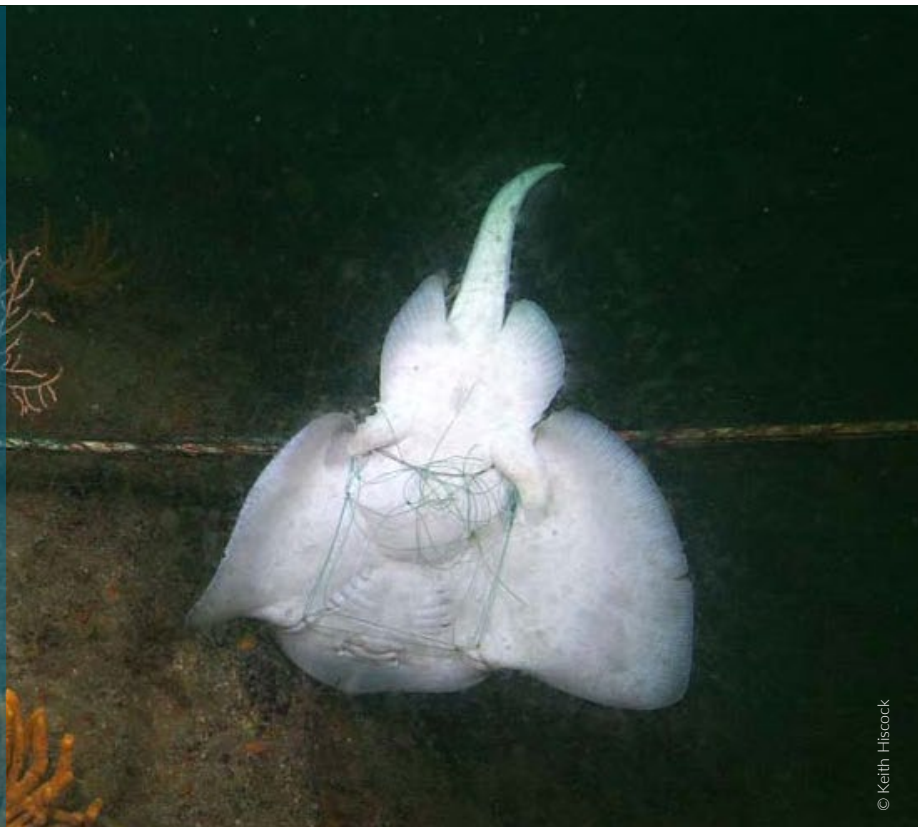
Overfishing, both intentional and unintentional is driving a third of shark species toward extinction.[53] Many species of sharks, skates and rays have traits (slow growth rates, late age of sexual maturity, long gestation period and other factors) which leave them vulnerable to population decline through overfishing.[54] Depletion of UK shark and ray populations is therefore intrinsically linked to the amount of fishing in UK waters.

Bycatch of sharks, skates and rays is complex. While some species, such as skates and rays, are commercially targeted for human consumption, many, including a range of dogfish and catshark species, are a "welcome bonus" in mixed fisheries, and others, such as porbeagle, are prohibited to target and retain (like marine mammals and seabirds). Therefore, there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to addressing bycatch. Unintentional catching, leading to depletion of populations, is a problem regardless of any fishing interest, and needs tackling through effective management measures.

Reporting of shark, skate and ray bycatch is very poor and there is a culture of systemic underreporting, with widescale failures to adhere to mandatory bycatch and discard (fish not kept but returned to the sea) recording requirements.[55] In addition, many bycatch reporting programmes have limited focus on sharks, skates and rays.[56] Bycatch reporting projects, such as the UK Government Bycatch Monitoring Programme, must increase their focus on sharks, skates and rays.

The headline statistic features three Critically Endangered elasmobranch species which are illegal to commercially fish. The populations of these species are already significantly depleted reducing the likelihood of bycatch but amplifying the impact of

"Reporting of shark, skate and ray bycatch is very poor and there is a culture of systemic underreporting, with widescale failures to adhere to mandatory bycatch and discard recording requirements."



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bycatch deaths on the remaining population. The headline figure was extracted from self-reported fisheries discard data from 2020-2024 held by the Marine Management Organisation, obtained via a freedom of information request.

It is almost certain that this figure is an underestimate, due to poor compliance with reporting regulations. Improving compliance with existing reporting regulations is key to first understanding, and then managing, elasmobranch bycatch in UK fisheries.

Comparative landings figures for skates – which are predominantly caught by UK vessels in domestic mixed fisheries - amounts to approximately 3000t per year (2018-2024).[57] Smoothhounds, an unmanaged species and therefore with a high risk of discarding and potential under reporting, amounts to approximately 500t caught per year (2018-2024).

Identification of some shark and skate species can be challenging, as many of them look similar at first glance. Some species groups such as skates and dogfish are still reported as generic aggregated species groups. However, it is very important, and in most cases legally required, that the species are recorded correctly. Without this data, fisheries managers' ability to develop effective fisheries management measures is limited.[58] Continued work to assist fishers with identification is necessary.

Case study

There is a systemic issue of underreporting elasmobranch bycatch. This is demonstrated by a recent study from neighbouring Irish waters which estimated that 81 Critically Endangered angel sharks were caught in tangle nets by one small fleet targeting crayfish in Tralee Bay between 2021-2024.[59] This area is one of the last refuges for this species in the Northeast Atlantic. 1,338 Critically Endangered flapper skate were also estimated to be caught by the same fishery. Taking into account that this was for one gear type in a restricted geographical area, just this level of bycatch for these species is significant and suggests underreporting elsewhere. The implications for bycatch in UK fisheries are extremely worrying.

Species spotlight

Atlantic salmon

Headline estimate for Atlantic salmon

Over 1,000 salmon caught annually by UK boats in the north east mackerel fishery
Working Group on North Atlantic Salmon

One salmon caught per 1.25km of coastal static net, with individual boats deploying up to 20km of nets
Lecointre, Scott and Roberts: Catching migratory salmonids at sea for the SAMARCH Project

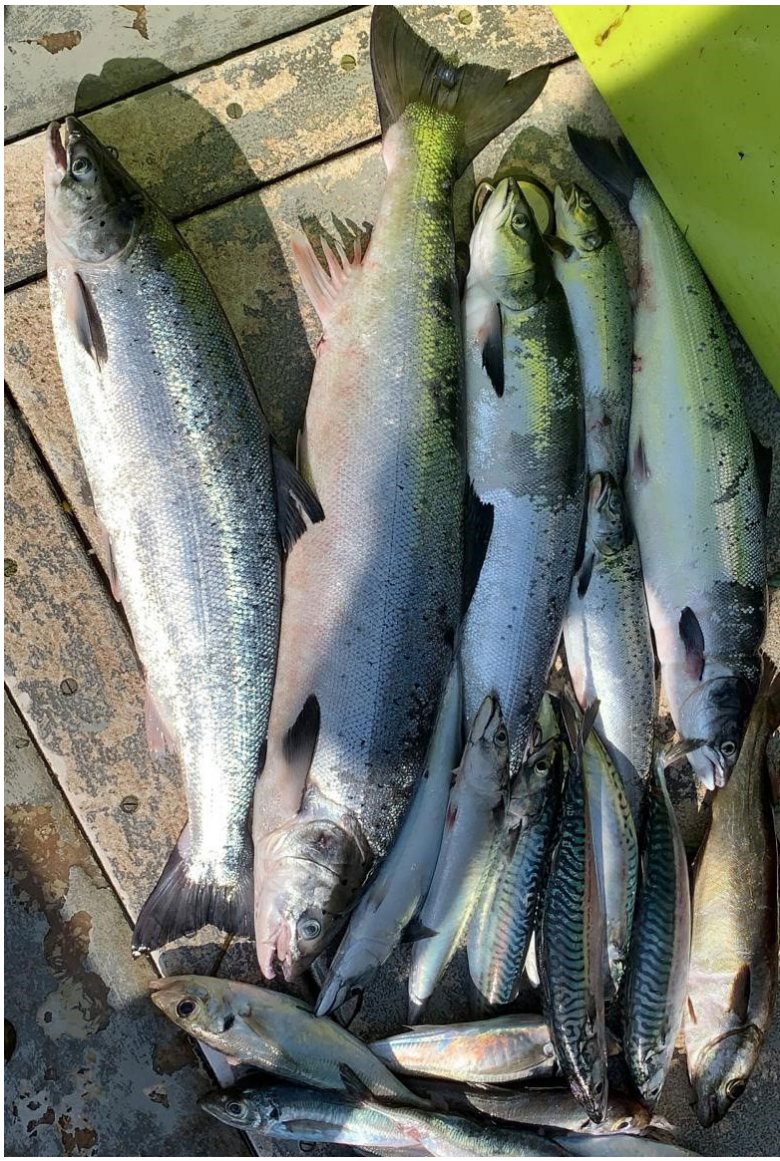
Recommendations

- Deliver and implement an Atlantic Salmon Bycatch Mitigation Action Plan with tangible, measurable and timebound actions to prevent Atlantic salmon bycatch, which should include:
  - » Recognising Atlantic salmon (and other migratory diadromous fish) as sea-fish so that they are included in UK Government marine research and monitoring programmes.
  - » Sampling of pelagic fishing vessels operating in young salmon migration highways and adult salmon feeding areas to determine protected fish species bycatch.
  - » Taking bycatch of protected fish species as a material consideration in Fisheries Management Plans for bass, mackerel, herring and sprat fisheries as well as the Marine Wildlife Bycatch Mitigation Initiative.

Atlantic salmon has long been a celebrated British fish, with their iconic migration from river to sea and back, but population numbers have rapidly deteriorated. In the latest assessment by the IUCN Red List, Atlantic salmon have been reclassified from Least Concern to Endangered in Great Britain as a result of a 30-50% decline in British populations since 2006. Commercial fishing for wild salmon to eat is not permitted. Wild salmon are still caught and killed as a bycatch in fisheries since they migrate in the same sea areas as other fish.

Salmon are mainly bycaught in pelagic (midwater) trawls and static nets but they are also caught by bottom trawls, bottom longlines, and purse-seines (where a net is led in a circle around groups of fish).[60, 61, 62] Significant fishing activity has been found in salmon migration regions in all of the months studied, suggesting a high bycatch risk.[63]

Estimating bycatch of salmon is challenging. The Salmonid Management Round the Channel Project has demonstrated bycatch by static nets within the inshore coastal waters of South-West England of one salmon per 1.25km of net. Large boats may deploy several tiers of gillnets, potentially resulting in lengths of almost 20 km of nets for a single boat. This implies large amounts of bycatch but an exact figure is not possible to estimate with current data.



Estimates of bycatch rates in the mackerel fishery vary widely. In the Norwegian Sea, estimates of bycatch in the mackerel fishery ranged from 0.0002 to 5.93 fish per tonne of mackerel caught. Information from Iceland indicates bycatch of 4.8 and 7.0 salmon per 1,000 tonnes of mackerel and herring. In the case of the Faroese mackerel fishery, bycatch of up to 37 salmon per 1,000 tonnes was estimated.[64] These are likely large underestimates as they do not consider fish that may be damaged but escape from the nets and some conservation tags implanted in salmon are not detected by screening equipment.

In 2024, UK boats caught over 233,000 tonnes of mackerel.[65] Using a central estimate of bycatch rates from Iceland of 5.4 salmon caught per 1,000 tonnes of mackerel, we estimate that over 1,000 salmon are likely to be caught in the UK mackerel fishery

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"Once the scale of bycatch is understood, the UK Government should develop regulatory measures."

each year.[66] This is a devastating impact of an unsustainable fishery where catch limits have consistently been set above scientific advice, leading to ecosystem impacts such as a 75% decline in Northeast Atlantic mackerel populations since 2015,[67] alongside significant protected species bycatch.

The ICES Working Group on Bycatch of Protected Species (WGBYC) monitors bycatch of protected species. Despite salmon being listed as 'Endangered' on the IUCN red-list and protected in the UK, and internationally, they were not listed on WGBYC until 2025. This listing should lead to better estimates of Atlantic salmon bycatch across the North Atlantic from May 2026.

This is a starting point but the UK government must quantify bycatch of Atlantic salmon and other sensitive fishes at sea. This involves collecting data on the number of salmon caught as bycatch, identifying hotspots, and analysing trends over time. This should include sampling of pelagic fishing vessels operating in young salmon migration highways and adult salmon feeding areas. Such data will inform the development of targeted interventions.

Once the scale of bycatch is understood, the UK Government should develop regulatory measures, including the adoption of selective fishing gear, temporal and spatial restrictions on fishing activities, and the establishment of strict bycatch quotas. These should be developed by including fish species as a material consideration in Fisheries Management Plans for bass, mackerel, herring and sprat fisheries as well as the Marine Wildlife Bycatch Mitigation Initiative.

Atlantic salmon must be comprehensively included in existing marine research programmes, including to meet evidence requirements under section 1 of the Fisheries Act 2020 through the **Data Collection Framework**. This requires collaboration between governments, NGOs, and research institutions to ensure that salmon-specific studies are prioritised and adequately funded. The use of eDNA (detection of small amounts of DNA left in the water by fish) must be explored as a novel means to detect and quantify Atlantic salmon bycatch across fisheries.

Conclusion and next steps

The impacts of fishing on our most-loved marine species can no longer be ignored. The evidence collated here shows bycatch is severely affecting marine wildlife populations, with substantial animal welfare concerns.

The UK government must urgently implement effective monitoring by revising plans for mandatory REM rollout to encompass all boats in a sped up timetable. The UK Government must prioritise, publish, consult on and deliver effective Bycatch Action Plans for all species groups covered here; with quantitative, time-bound commitments for bycatch reduction and clear plans for implementation and resourcing. This will help species recover, help progress towards GES and avoid the suffering and death of thousands of animals.

Wildlife and Countryside Link is the largest environmental coalition in England, bringing together 97 organisations to campaign for the protection of the natural world.

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WDC WHALE AND DOLPHIN CONSERVATION

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WWF

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