

Reducing Global Cetacean Bycatch: A Call to Action



The Problem: *Incidental capture in fishing operations is the major threat to whales, dolphins and porpoises worldwide. Several species and many populations will be lost in the next few decades if nothing is done. Urgent national and international action is needed.*

The Response: *This Call to Action arose from an International Workshop on Reducing Cetacean Bycatch held in Annapolis, Maryland, U.S.A. on January 11-12, 2002. It involved cetacean and fisheries experts from six continents and was organized by WWF.*

The individuals putting forth this Call to Action have formed a Cetacean Bycatch Action Network to promote solutions to the global cetacean bycatch problem according to the needs and principles outlined below. The Cetacean Bycatch Action Network calls upon all relevant intergovernmental and governmental agencies, environmental organizations, industry groups and scientific research organizations to move forward with the greatest urgency to address the cetacean bycatch problem and find solutions that allow the sustainable use of marine resources.

The Current Situation

Considerable advances have been made in a few fisheries in the development, testing and implementation of measures designed to reduce the incidental mortality of cetaceans.

These advances have included technological and operational changes and management actions. Some of these measures have proven highly effective and many lessons could be transferred to other fisheries. In addressing the cetacean bycatch problem, however, **progress has been slow or non-existent throughout much of the developed and developing world.** In some cases, awareness of the cetacean bycatch problem is low. In others, the implementation of programs to mitigate it has been given low priority.

Scientists, non-government organizations (NGOs) and others must work to raise the issue with the public, industry, national and international regulatory agencies and governments when needed, and to cooperate with them in their efforts to find solutions.



An Irrawaddy dolphin killed as bycatch in the Philippines, where fewer than 50 of these dolphins survive./ ©WWF

What Needs to Be Done

A coordinated, cooperative effort must be made to address cetacean bycatch globally, emphasizing the search for general solutions that can be applied to many fisheries, but always acknowledging that these solutions will have to be adapted to the local conditions of each region through the input of the communities involved. The special circumstances in developing countries must be recognized, and assistance provided, by governments, scientists and NGOs of the developed world.

Direct involvement of the fishing industry in reducing cetacean bycatch is essential at all stages, from recognizing the problem to developing and implementing solutions. To the extent possible, those involved should seek solutions that eliminate unsustainable bycatch without harming fishing. Reducing bycatches can be of great benefit to fishermen as well as cetaceans.

Fishermen can provide enormous creativity in addressing the problem. Appropriate incentives must be put in place to effectively utilize this creativity.

Scientists, the fishing industry, NGOs and managers must work together to: (1) share existing information and techniques, scientific data and expertise, and experience with different policy options; and (2) generate new knowledge, approaches and acceptable solutions. Areas such as development of new fishing gear and procedures reducing the ecological impact of fishing should be given high priority throughout the world. Training of new specialists to work on cetacean bycatch problems must begin as quickly as possible, particularly for developing countries.

In some regions, bycaught cetaceans are increasingly utilized for human consumption in many nations (legally or illegally), and incidental catch is evolving into directed catch. These situations must be identified and the bycatches assessed and managed for sustainability.

Better data are needed on cetacean populations and bycatch levels worldwide. However, lack of comprehensive information on the magnitude of the bycatch or the size and biology of particular cetacean populations must not be used as a reason for inaction. Default or generalized models of cetacean populations and relative bycatch rates can and should be used to show the potential existence of a conservation problem and as a basis to initiate actions to mitigate it.

Clear, agreed, balanced objectives must be developed for reducing cetacean bycatch in the short-, medium- and long-term:

- These objectives should be based on science and grounded on solid premises of ecosystem management. This means that in conserving cetacean populations affected by fisheries interactions, managers should also minimize impacts on other associated marine species and preserve the structure and function of the ecosystems they occupy.
- These objectives should also be precautionary and prioritized. We urge the development and implementation of programs to reduce cetacean bycatches without delay, even when uncertainties make it difficult to quantify the magnitude of the qualitatively identified conservation threats. The scale and speed of the response should increase where fishing activity has already been identified as a threat to cetacean species and populations.

A harbor porpoise killed from entanglement in a gillnet./©WWF

This Call to Action was signed by the following:

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For more information on cetacean bycatch and the Cetacean Bycatch Action Network, go to www.cetaceanbycatch.org.