

Written Evidence submitted by the World Cetacean Alliance (MM0006)

Introduction

The following evidence is submitted jointly by the [World Cetacean Alliance](#) (WCA), a global partnership and UK-based charity dedicated to the protection of cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises) worldwide, and [Sussex Dolphin Project](#), the WCA's flagship community initiative on the south coast of England.

1. What is the status of marine mammal populations?

Despite some valuable research work in certain hotspots around the world, the overall status of marine mammal populations – particularly small cetaceans – is still poorly understood, including in waters around the UK.

9 species (around 10% of all known cetacean species) are classed as 'Data Deficient' according to the [IUCN SSC Cetacean Specialist Group](#); in other words, there is insufficient information about their abundance and/or distribution to be able to evaluate the risk of extinction.

In Sussex, dedicated research on marine mammals didn't begin until the launch of Sussex Dolphin Project in 2018, and the health of the populations in Sussex is not yet known.

There is a need for increased funding, along with national and international coordination, to monitor and assess the status of cetacean populations and factors that are threatening them.

Cetaceans are extremely important as indicator or [sentinel species](#), meaning that the health of their populations indicates the [overall health of the marine environment](#). They are also effective flagship species for marine conservation, attracting considerable support and engagement from the general public, and have been found to play a valuable role in [carbon sequestration](#) as well as supporting the [structure and function of the oceans](#).

Investing in a better understanding of cetacean populations is essential for assessing the impact of issues such as climate change and pollution, not only on marine ecosystems but also with potential implications for human health. Strengthening our understanding of cetacean populations is, of course, vital in supporting efforts to protect and conserve these species, which would result in benefits for the marine environment and the climate as a whole.

2. How, and for what purpose, are marine mammals being killed?

One of the greatest killers of cetaceans globally is entanglement/entrapment in fishing gear. This can occur as the result of active fishing vessels capturing non-target species (known as [‘bycatch’](#)) and when marine mammals become entangled in lost, abandoned or discarded fishing gear (also known as ‘ghost gear’).

According to a recent report by the [UK Cetacean Strandings Investigation Programme](#) (CSIP), bycatch is the leading cause of death for marine mammals around the UK. Sadly, since the beginning of CSIP’s reports in the 1990s, this finding has not changed, particularly in areas such as Sussex and Cornwall where there are high levels of destructive fishing activity.

Due to its incidental nature, bycatch has no purpose and is an entirely needless and avoidable threat. Bycatch of cetaceans can be mitigated and significantly reduced, but only with effective incentives and regulatory enforcement to ensure sustainable change from fisheries.

3. Beyond whaling, what human behaviours are affecting whale populations and how?

In addition to the threat of bycatch, the fishing industry has multiple direct and indirect negative impacts on cetaceans, including:

- Loss of prey due to [overfishing](#) and (in the case of bottom-towed fishing gear) [habitat destruction](#).
- [Underwater noise pollution](#) from fishing activity, which causes stress and disturbance to cetaceans, as well as interfering with important behaviours like hunting, navigation and communication.
- Increased ocean acidification as the result of [carbon dioxide being released from the seabed](#) by bottom trawling.

The [oil and gas industry](#) is also responsible for significant threats to cetacean populations, such as:

- Dangerous levels of underwater noise from seismic exploration and drilling, which has been found to cause [hearing damage](#) to cetaceans, disrupt their hunting, navigation and communication.
- Habitat loss as oil and gas developments lead to cetaceans [being displaced](#) from important feeding and breeding grounds.
- Ill health and mortality due to [industrial pollutants](#) (e.g. heavy metals; oil spills).
- [Numerous impacts resulting from climate change](#), which is driven by fossil fuel consumption and threatens cetaceans by:

- reducing the availability of prey (through ocean warming and acidification);
- forcing them out of their natural range and habitats;
- making them more vulnerable to disease and contaminants.

Other human-related threats to cetaceans include:

- [Collision with vessels](#) (also known as ‘ship strikes’), which is becoming a higher risk as marine traffic around the world increases.
- Noise pollution from commercial shipping and use of sonar technologies (e.g. in naval exercises), which may lead to [increased strandings](#).
- [Degraded water quality and toxic pollutants](#), often as the result of agricultural and industrial waste, which become concentrated in cetaceans due to their position at the top of their respective food chains.

4. How effective are the global protections of marine mammals?

It’s difficult to assess how effective protections are worldwide due to the incomplete understanding of the status of some marine mammal populations, but lessons can be learned from cases where data is available.

For example, it’s thought that the critically endangered [vaquita porpoise](#) now numbers [only 10 individuals](#). This species is facing extinction as the result of bycatch from gillnet fishing and, despite overdue efforts by the Mexican Government to ban the use of gillnets within the vaquita’s habitat, illegal fishing continues to be prevalent.

The vaquita’s plight illustrates the need for fisheries authorities worldwide to address the threat of bycatch as early as possible through strict enforcement of regulations and appropriate support for more responsible practices (e.g. provision of alternative, sustainable gear; incentives and compensation).

A more positive example is the humpback whale, a species that is often considered a conservation success story, as research has found that humpback populations have [rebounded](#) in many [areas](#) since the moratorium on commercial whaling in 1986 (although it’s unknown how a rapidly changing climate will affect this recovery).

The success of the humpback demonstrates the importance of global coordination and a commitment to conservation measures across national borders. Cetaceans are wide-ranging, often migratory animals, with some species travelling thousands of miles between seasonal habitats, meaning that any efforts to protect them are more likely to be successful where they include international cooperation.

5. How can the UK better protect marine mammals?

The most effective and immediate action that the UK can take to protect marine mammals is to eliminate the primary threat of bycatch/entanglement from fishing.

This would also help the UK to fulfil its legal duty under the ‘ecosystem’ objective of the [Fisheries Act 2020](#); that is:

- (a) fish and aquaculture activities are managed using an ecosystem-based approach so as to ensure that their negative impacts on marine ecosystems are minimised and, where possible, reversed, and
- (b) incidental catches of sensitive species are minimised and, where possible, eliminated.

The UK can achieve this by:

- Restricting licenses to exclude destructive, large-scale fishing vessels (such as pelagic freezer trawlers and bottom trawlers) from UK waters, including the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).
- Providing financial incentives for the UK’s small-scale, inshore fishers to modify their gear or change gear type in order to minimise bycatch and entanglement.
- Introduce the use of Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) with cameras on all fishing vessels as a license condition for access to UK waters, including the EEZ. This should require video monitoring of the net mouth being opened (since large, bycaught animals often fall out of nets as they are hauled or are removed before the nets are landed), in addition to monitoring of the net and catch being brought on board.

We also recently submitted feedback to Defra as part of the public consultation on the [draft Joint Fisheries Statement](#), identifying the need for clearer, measurable commitments on bycatch reduction from UK fisheries authorities.

6. What role can the UK Government play to protect and promote the conservation of marine mammals internationally?

The UK Government has an opportunity to set a precedent for world-leading marine mammal conservation by:

- Taking action to eliminate bycatch within UK waters.
- Strengthening protections for marine habitats.
- Urgently reducing greenhouse gas emissions and ending support for oil and gas developments.

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