



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

The Rt Hon Lord Benyon
Minister of State for Biosecurity, Marine and Rural Affairs

2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF



Foreign, Commonwealth
& Development Office

The Rt Hon Lord Goldsmith
Minister of State for Overseas Territories, Commonwealth,
Energy, Climate and Environment

King Charles St
London
SW1A 2AH

Rt Hon Sir Robert Goodwill MP
Chair, Environment, Food and
Rural Affairs Committee
House of Commons,
London,
SW1A 0AA

17 January 2023

Dear Robert,

We welcomed the opportunity discuss marine mammals and wider issues with the Committee on 10 January 2023 and we thank you for the constructive additional questions, to which we respond in full below.

Will the Dolphin & Porpoise Strategy contain measurable, timebound targets? If not, how will you know if it is successful?

The UK Dolphin and Porpoise Conservation Strategy, the development of which is being led by the Scottish Government with support from the other administrations, aims to ensure that appropriate management is in place to respond to new and emerging pressures affecting cetaceans in UK waters.

A public consultation took place in 2021 and work is ongoing to address comments made. UK administrations are planning to reconvene in 2023 to discuss next steps further to the consultation, including how the objectives of the strategy will be assessed, the consideration of targets for each administration, and pathways for implementing measurable actions in each of the UK administrations.

There is already considerable work being undertaken across the various UK administrations to deliver action for cetaceans in UK waters. These actions, which will be important for the delivery of the Strategy, include publication and ongoing implementation of the UK Bycatch Mitigation Initiative and establishing approaches to manage wildlife tourism through codes of conduct.

The action plan in the Strategy will be a working document that can be updated as work progresses and will provide measurable milestones.

Will the Bycatch Mitigation Initiative be supported by an action plan with measurable, timebound targets to reduce bycatch numbers?

The BMI is a joint document by the UK Government and Devolved Administrations. Implementation of the BMI is a matter for individual fisheries policy authorities, which have different circumstances and priorities and are at different stages in the policy cycle. It was therefore not appropriate for the BMI to prescribe the exact method or timeframes that the fisheries policy authorities will use to develop and implement policies. It will be for each fisheries policy authority to set time-bound targets, where appropriate, within their area of competence.

Defra are committed to producing an implementation plan for England that will detail specific actions to reduce bycatch. This will be developed working closely with relevant stakeholders, industries and authorities.

When considering targets, it will be important to engage with stakeholders including the fishery industry to ensure there is a strong evidence base to inform their selection, including practical ways to develop and test measures and demonstrate the effectiveness of reducing bycatch.

Defra are already taking action to meet the Bycatch Mitigation Initiative's objectives. For example,

- We are already trialling bycatch mitigation measures – including two types of acoustic deterrent devices ('pingers') for cetacean bycatch through the *Clean Catch UK 1* and trialling an acoustic scaring device to deter seals from fishing gear, and to develop a new type of mitigation device called a 'passive acoustic reflector' which we hope will make fishing gear more 'acoustically visible' to cetaceans
- In 2022, we retendered for the Bycatch Monitoring Programme in its current form (which has been running for over 15 years) but included an additional component to the project scope to expand and diversify monitoring techniques. Together the programme is now worth over £1 million for 3 years, with the overarching aim to provide better bycatch estimates.

We intend to scale up this work to meet the challenge of minimising and, where possible, eliminating bycatch. Defra will soon be going out to tender for a new contract for *Clean Catch UK*. Through this revised contract we aim to expand the geographical scope of the project, start new trials to test mitigation measures and bring a wider range of experts into the project.

Why are cetacean monitoring programmes not directly supported by the Government in the same way as those for seals when cetaceans' conservation status is more perilous?

The Government is directly supporting a range of marine mammal monitoring programmes to improve our understanding of the status of marine mammals in the UK, both for cetaceans and seals. We also work with our nearest neighbours in the North-East Atlantic to support policies to protect marine mammals through the OSPAR convention.

The key monitoring programmes for cetaceans that the Government provides funding for include:

- ***Small Cetacean Abundance in European Waters and the North Sea (SCANS)*** which provides comprehensive abundance and distribution data for cetacean species. Outputs from the latest SCANS survey in the North East Atlantic and the data within the new Joint Cetacean Data Programme will better enable us to assess population status and establish abundance trends for several cetacean species. For the 4th iteration of the SCANS survey (2022), Defra provided £550,000 of funding and Marine Scotland provided £50,000 of funding.
- ***Cetacean Strandings Investigation Programme (CSIP)*** which investigates causes of death of stranded marine mammals to improve our understanding of threats to marine mammals. Defra provides over £3 million of funding for CSIP alongside approximately £590,000 by Welsh Government, both through a 10-year contract from 2021 to 2031.
- ***The Scottish Marine Animal Stranding Scheme (SMASS)*** is funded as a separate project by the Scottish Government to investigate causes of death of marine mammals in Scotland. CSIP and SMASS collaborate and share data to build an understanding at a UK level. SMASS receives £480,000 of funding from Marine Scotland on a 3-year basis.
- ***Bycatch Monitoring Programme*** which estimates bycatch rates for marine mammals across UK fisheries in order to inform further action that will reduce bycatch whilst reducing any potential impact on fisheries. Defra recently let a new 3-year contract for this programme that will expand it and diversify the monitoring methods that are used.
- The ***East Coast Marine Mammal Acoustic Study (ECOMMAS)*** monitors dolphin and harbour porpoise populations. Run by Marine Scotland since 2013, ECOMMAS uses echolocation click detectors at 30 sites on the East coast of Scotland, and broadband sound recorders at ten of these sites, to acoustically detect and monitor cetaceans.
- To further support the development of measures to support cetaceans, Defra is undertaking a programme of work to better understand the environmental impacts of offshore wind upon a range of species, including cetaceans, to find strategic solutions to manage and mitigate impacts. As part of this, Defra is investigating the effectiveness of the current noise management approach and will identify what interventions are necessary to reduce and control underwater noise.

In addition, ***Defra's Marine Natural Capital and Ecosystem Assessment*** programme is a new science, innovation and transformation programme within Defra. It will collect data on extent, condition and change over time of England's ecosystems and natural capital and the benefits to society. Within this programme, the government has committed to collect more baseline data on marine mammals around England including understanding how they are using the marine environment.

There are various new technologies which have the potential to increase the efficiency of marine mammal monitoring. What is the Government doing to support the growth of new monitoring technology and how much funding is allocated to this area?

The Government is supporting the growth of new monitoring technology through a number of projects. In 2022, we retendered for the Bycatch Monitoring Programme in its current form (which has been running for over 15 years) but included an additional component to the project scope to expand and diversify monitoring techniques. Together the programme is now worth over £1 million for 3 years, with the overarching aim to provide better bycatch estimates. The project is looking at how to expand the programme's broadscale monitoring capabilities and bring together data from a wide range of sources, including monitoring through the local scale Clean Catch UK project, the existing Cefas Fisheries Observer Programme, self-reporting by fishers and any Remote Electronic Monitoring trials, to provide us with better bycatch estimates.

This newly restructured project is being led by the Sea Mammals Research Unit at the University of St Andrews, in a consortium with Cefas, the Centre of Ecology and Hydrology and the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations. Part of that project will include identifying opportunities for Remote Electronic Monitoring and other techniques to be used alongside traditional observer monitoring to provide better estimates of bycatch rates in different fisheries.

The Government also funds innovative bycatch monitoring through the **Clean Catch UK** project. Defra provided £1.1 million of funding to *Clean Catch UK 1* over its project duration (2019-2023). *Clean Catch UK 2* will begin in August 2023. Clean Catch has developed a mobile app for fishers to self-report their bycatch. This is being validated through electronic monitoring using cameras on board participating vessels. The project so far has shown that self-reporting can be a useful tool in understanding bycatch. Clean Catch UK has also deployed acoustic arrays to monitor the local presence of cetaceans.

To promote innovation and development, Defra is funding and working with a consortium of experts to develop a new electronic monitoring system called ***Insight360*** that will use machine learning technology to automatically detect cetacean bycatch during fishing. That system is currently in the development and testing phase. Defra will have contributed just over £1 million towards this programme over its 5-year duration (2020-2025).

In addition, the Marine Natural Capital and Ecosystem Assessment programme recently launched a £1.5 million innovation competition with industry to help improve our observation of biodiversity, including marine mammals. Among the competition winners, there will be multiple projects that will progress techniques and help to improve our understanding of the status of marine mammals. The competition winners are expected to be announced in early February 2023.

What is the Government doing to support citizen science and volunteer networks who engage in monitoring?

Systematic monitoring by highly skilled individuals form the basis of marine mammal monitoring programmes in the UK. This is what we do through our monitoring programmes such as SCANS, the Cetacean Strandings Investigation Programme and the UK Bycatch Monitoring Programme.

However, supplementary data from citizen science is extremely valuable and is increasingly being used to fill evidence gaps by, for example, providing seasonal data or data on rarer species. Citizen science data are included in the Joint Cetacean Data Programme and one of the aims of that project was to mobilise and standardise existing data including data from citizen science.

Volunteers are already contributing to strandings programmes, expanding the capacity of these programmes to sample and record more strandings. Citizen science is also used to identify areas of persistent density for designation of harbour porpoise Special Areas of Conservation (SACs).

Through Defra's marine Natural Capital and Ecosystem Assessment (NCEA) programme. Defra are reviewing and developing robust protocols for citizen science (through Natural England), setting out how the department can coordinate and integrate with existing citizen science programmes. As part of this, the programme is engaging with citizen science efforts for image, video and acoustic data analysis.

The marine NCEA programme is also exploring opportunities to collaborate with citizen science groups and coastal communities to collect new data which contributes to our natural capital valuation, for example understanding the recreational value of and attitudes towards marine assets.

In addition to this, the marine NCEA programme is scoping out the possibility of mobilising acoustic evidence held by citizen groups and enhancing engagement with academics in the analysis of acoustic data for habitat use and site foraging behaviours by cetaceans.

In addition, we agreed to write to the Committee regarding the following points.

Applicability of any requirements introduced for UK vessels in respect of bycatch monitoring to foreign vessels operating in the UK EEZ.

In 2021, Defra introduced a licence condition for all commercial vessels fishing in the UK's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) to report any bycatch of marine mammals during fishing operations to the Marine Management Organisation (MMO) within 48 hours of the end of the trip.

The data is feeding into UK bycatch monitoring programmes to help identify where potential fisheries interactions are happening.

The Blue Belt Programme and how this is helping marine mammal conservation and welfare in UK Overseas Territories.

The UK Government's flagship Blue Belt Programme, led by the FCDO's Polar Regions Department, has supported the UK's Overseas Territories to enhance marine protection across 4.3million square kilometres of the sea, home to a huge range of unique and endangered species, with some found nowhere else on Earth.

The Blue Belt Programme has received approximately £40m since inception in 2015, and that funding has been dedicated to improving scientific understanding; implementing evidence-based marine management strategies; developing novel approaches to surveillance and enforcement capabilities and ensuring activities are sustainable long-term across these very remote and sparsely populated areas.

The Blue Belt Programme works with Ascension, British Antarctic Territory, British Indian Ocean Territory, Pitcairn Islands, St Helena, Tristan da Cunha, Turks & Caicos, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands. Two sub-programmes provide additional support for all UK Overseas Territories: the Blue Belt Ocean Shield works to assess and understand activities that take place within the marine zones of the Overseas Territories; and the Global Ocean Wildlife Analysis Network using BRUVS (Baited Remote Underwater Video Systems) monitors biodiversity and marine ecosystems in a non-destructive manner.

Turning specifically to the protection of marine mammals, waters around Pitcairn are key mating and calving ground for humpback whales. These animals are part of the Oceania sub-population that has not yet fully recovered from commercial whaling and is still considered to be endangered. In 2016, the Government of Pitcairn designated their entire EEZ as a no-take marine protect area (MPA), protecting humpback whales from impacts such as entanglement in fishing gear and collisions with ships.

St Helena has resident populations of three species of dolphin. The Government of St Helena also designated their entire EEZ as an MPA in 2016 and has legislation in place to make it an offence to hunt, kill, wound, pursue, molest or disturb during periods of migration listed species of cetaceans.

Through the Blue Belt Programme, the British Antarctic Survey conducted a survey of whale abundance, estimating that over 43,000 whales use South Georgia and South Sandwich Island waters in summer, mostly humpback whales. We estimated that over 24,000 humpback whales (the southwest Atlantic breeding population) now seasonally feed in the Scotia Arc, a number which is very close to their pre-whaling estimates (25,000), suggesting this population of humpback whales is close to complete recovery.

Yours sincerely,



THE RT HON LORD BENYON



**THE RT HON THE LORD GOLDSMITH OF
RICHMOND PARK**