

## New Project Will Tackle Whale Entanglement

By Cat Lazaroff

**BOSTON, Massachusetts**, July 24, 2002 (ENS) - Almost 60,000 whales, dolphins and porpoises are killed each year worldwide by entanglement with fishing nets, a coalition of the world's leading cetacean scientists reported Tuesday. The scientists have agreed to form a global response team, the Cetacean Bycatch Action Network, to assist governments and fishers in finding solutions to the problem.

*This porpoise is one of an estimated 60,000 cetaceans killed each year after becoming entangled in fishing gear.* (Photo courtesy [Cetacean Bycatch Action Network](#))



The scientists, meeting at the New England Aquarium in conjunction with the regional meeting of the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy, released new research detailing the impact that unintentional bycatch by fishing vessels has on the world's 80 or so species of whales, dolphins and porpoises - classified together as cetaceans.

"The numbers are staggering: my research estimates that at least 150 whales and dolphins die each day after being accidentally caught in commercial fisheries," said Dr. Andy Read of the Duke University Marine Laboratory, co-chair of the new Cetacean Bycatch Action Network.

In January, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) convened a summit of the world's leading cetacean experts in Annapolis, Maryland, attended by 25 scientists from six continents.

The group concluded that the single biggest threat facing cetaceans worldwide is death as bycatch in fishing gear.



Bycatch is the fishing industry's term for the capture of non-target species in fishing gear. Besides cetaceans and other marine mammals, sea turtles, seabirds and non-commercial fish species also are regularly caught and killed unintentionally as bycatch.

***This Irrawaddy dolphin died after becoming entangled with fishing gear. Fewer than 50 individuals of this species still live in waters off the Philippines.*** (Photo courtesy [Cetacean Bycatch Action Network](#))

The estimated number of cetaceans lost to bycatch is almost triple the average annual commercial catch of whales during the 20th century - about 21,470 a year - a rate of hunting that caused severe declines in almost all large whale species. While a global moratorium on commercial whaling went into effect in 1986, bycatch of cetaceans continues unabated in much of the world.

"There are effective solutions being used by some fishermen around the world, but more action is needed to apply those lessons learned to other fisheries," said Read.

Read and the other 25 scientists involved in the January meeting announced Tuesday that they are forming a rapid response network to help governments, conservation organizations and fishers work together to address bycatch. The Cetacean Bycatch Action Network will work to find solutions to cetacean entanglement that work for individual fisheries.

"This is the first coordinated effort by the world's experts to tackle the global problem of death from entanglement, the number one killer of whales and dolphins," said William Reilly, chair of the board of WWF and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency administrator during the presidency of George H.W. Bush.

"Because of the urgent need for action, World Wildlife Fund has now made this one of its priorities for our marine conservation work," Reilly added.



***A dead pilot whale on the deck of a fishing vessel.*** (Photo courtesy National Marine Fisheries Service)

Some species of cetaceans have already been pushed to the brink of extinction by bycatch. In Mexico's Gulf of California, for example, up to 15 percent of the critically endangered vaquita population is killed every year in fishing nets. With a population of only around 500, the small porpoise - found nowhere else on Earth - cannot afford these losses.

Solving the vaquita's problem will not be easy, but the scientists at Tuesday's press conference said it should be possible.

"My experience working with fishermen to reduce harbor porpoise bycatch in New England is a good illustration of the challenges and opportunities the network will face," said Scott Kraus, director of research at the New England Aquarium and a member of the new action network.

In the Gulf of Maine during the 1990s, bycatch of harbor porpoise in gillnets was so severe that federal officials were considering placing the population on the endangered species list. A combination of techniques, including use of pingers, temporary fisheries closures and placement of observers on fishing boats, reduced mortality by about 77 percent in just the first year of implementation in 1999, preventing the need for additional federal protection for the species.

"Generally, fishermen want to avoid bycatch for economic reasons, so reducing bycatch is a win-win situation for fishermen and cetaceans," Kraus explained. "But one size fits all solutions will not work and our network is committed to working toward solutions for individual fisheries."

***Many whale species are still declining, despite an international ban on commercial whaling, because of losses to bycatch.*** (Photo courtesy National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration)



The global response network will provide scientific expertise to regions of the world where cetaceans are in crisis to help reduce bycatch. It will also play an advisory role to fisheries and governments, provide training and promote research and outreach.

A new website launched Tuesday, <http://www.cetaceanbycatch.org>, will serve as a virtual resource center for scientists to collaborate and share their expertise with each other and with governments and fishermen that request assistance.

"In releasing this call to action, we are urging governments worldwide to address this issue as part of their fisheries management," said Andy Rosenberg, co-chair of the Cetacean Bycatch Action Network and dean of the College of Life Sciences and Agriculture at the University of New Hampshire.

"The United States has made some progress in mitigating bycatch, but we need to show more leadership by helping solve this problem worldwide and continuing to improve our own track record," Rosenberg added.

Whales and dolphins can become entangled in commonly used fishing gear like gillnets, tangle nets, trammel nets, trawl nets and long lines. Solutions to the problem of entanglement vary by region and species involved, but can include adding gillnet floats that break away when hit by a whale, acoustic "pingers" that warn marine mammals away from nets and buoy lines that are less likely to snare whales and dolphins.



***A gillnetter sets a net off the coast of Alaska. Gillnets, among the most widespread of fishing gear, are believed to be responsible for much of global cetacean bycatch. Many experts argue that wherever there are gillnets, there is cetacean bycatch.*** (Photo courtesy National Marine Fisheries Service)

Setting nets in deeper water, an inexpensive and simple strategy, can also help to reduce bycatch in some cases. Commercial fishers have been crucial in developing these successful gear modifications, the scientists noted.

When caught in fishing gear, small whales, dolphins and porpoises often die because they are not strong enough to break free and come to the surface to breathe. Large whales can usually break free, but

may continue to tow some of the gear for long periods, causing injuries and sometimes death.

Last year, biologists spent months trying to save the life of endangered northern right whale that had developed a massive infection in a wound across its upper jaw, caused by synthetic marine line that cut deeply into the tissue. Researchers lost the signal from a satellite transmitter attached to the whale in September 2001, and the whale - one of just 300 estimated to live in the wild - is believed to have died.

In some cases, reducing bycatch may include the need for stiffer penalties to enforce existing laws. A ship fishing illegally in the Galapagos Marine Reserve off the coast of Ecuador in May 2002 killed or injured some 70 dolphins in its nets, while harvesting just eight yellow-fin tuna.



***Orcas, also known as killer whales, cruise near a fishing boat.*** (Photo courtesy National Marine Fisheries Service)

The captain of the boat, El Dorado, was fined the equivalent of four U.S. pennies and spent two weeks confined to his own ship - with shore leave privileges. The incident is one of dozens that happen every year in the Galapagos Marine Reserve with little or no penalties against the lawbreakers, WWF notes.

"This egregious act reflects a conscious disregard for enforcing national and international norms that both governments have agreed to and is part of a larger pattern of illegal acts that must be stopped if Ecuador wants to sell its tuna in the U.S.," said William Eichbaum, WWF vice president. "The Galapagos Islands are a living laboratory of evolution and the laws banning industrial fishing are there to protect this fragile ecosystem."