

United Kingdom Voluntary National Cetacean Conservation Report, 2024

**This report provides an update on cetacean conservation
since IWC68
National Governmental Authority Submitting the Report:**

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This report details activities and development undertaken by the UK since 2022. For further information see the UK Voluntary National Cetacean Conservation Report, 2022. Note that ongoing activities in the UK 2022 report and those highlighted in these 2024 updates were undertaken by the previous government. Following the 2024 UK General Election, continuation of these activities will be subject to confirmation of the new UK Government / Ministers' priorities

1. Legal developments (laws, regulations and other regulatory measures related to cetaceans).

In January 2024 the UK government announced that it would prohibit the fishing of sandeel within English waters of the North Sea, and the Scottish government announced that it would prohibit fishing for sandeel in all Scottish waters. These prohibitions are expected to deliver benefits to cetaceans

The Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) published new guidance for standardised passive acoustic monitoring in 2023. For more information, see:

<https://hub.jncc.gov.uk/assets/fb7d345b-ec24-4c60-aba2-894e50375e33#resource-list>

2. Information on whale watching operations (scale, target species/populations and relevant management issues).

No updates reported.

3. Current Government programs related to cetacean conservation.

In Summer 2023, the UK government designated the first three Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs) in English waters, one inshore (Allonby Bay) and two offshore (North East of Farnes Deep and Dolphin Head). HPMAs take a whole site approach, conserving all species and habitats within the HPMAs boundary and associated processes. This includes the water column. The habitats in North East of Farnes Deep serve as a nursery and spawning areas for a variety of fish species and they provide foraging areas for a range of fish, seabirds, and marine mammals. Evidence indicates that harbour porpoise, minke whale, and white-beaked dolphin all use this site.

As part of the Offshore Wind Enabling Actions Programme, Defra has published [ten reports](#) on the impacts and management of underwater noise from offshore wind. These reports will

be used to inform future policy development. of underwater noise from offshore wind. These reports will be used to inform future policy development.

The Scottish Government manages the Scottish Marine Mammal Scientific Support grant, which is carried out by the Sea Mammal Research Unit at the University of St Andrews. The paper '[Harbour porpoise \(*Phocoena phocoena*\) presence is reduced during tidal turbine operation](#)' was published in 2021 as an output of this research.

[Clean Catch UK](#) is expanding in scope. This project will learn from and build on past efforts to further strengthen collaborative efforts to improve bycatch monitoring and mitigation in the UK. This will include: gathering feedback on Clean Catch to date; a UK-wide review of where bycatch occurs, monitoring and/or mitigation initiatives, and success stories; with the fishing industry, developing best practice guides for bycatch mitigation; Continuing the delivery of the cetacean bycatch mitigation trial in the Southwest and co-designing a second trial in England to test innovative measures for reducing bycatch in a fully collaborative environment.

The MMO is currently assessing the impacts of fishing in the portions of MPAs offshore of 6nm in English waters designated for harbour porpoise (i.e. Southern North Sea SAC and Bristol Channel Approaches SAC) to determine whether management is required. MMO is drafting these assessments in liaison with IFCAs and DAs. Any management concluded necessary through these assessments will be shared for comment in a public formal consultation.

NatureScot manages the Scottish Government's Nature Restoration Fund which funds projects that restore wildlife and habitats on land and sea to address the twin crises of biodiversity loss and climate change. This funded a two-year project from 2022-2024 to test mitigation measures to reduce entanglement of minke whales, basking sharks and other megafauna in creel gear. The project report '[Collaborating with Scotland's creel fishers to reduce entanglement of minke whales, basking sharks and other megafauna through gear modifications](#)' was published in March 2024.

4. Current threats to cetacean conservation and management measures taken/proposed.

From 1990-2023, 4574 UK stranded cetaceans were examined at post-mortem by CSIP partners and by SMASS which revealed a wide variety of both anthropogenic and non-anthropogenic causes of death. Non-anthropogenic causes of death included cases of interspecific aggressive interactions by bottlenose dolphins and grey seals with some cetacean species (n=505).

Of the anthropogenic drivers of mortality, bycatch and entanglement in fishing gear has been the primary direct human-induced cause of death in the UK, with evidence of entanglement in a variety of gear types diagnosed in nearly 20% of all UK stranded cetaceans examined at post-mortem. Bycatch appeared to have highest impact in short-beaked common dolphins (n=390 or 38% of examined strandings) and harbour porpoises (n=390 or 15% of examined strandings), although impacts on populations are currently unclear. Bycatch was most frequently diagnosed in southwest England. Ship-strike was recorded in a relatively small number of both small and large UK stranded cetaceans (n=52).

In the UK as observed through the CSIP, impacts from marine litter through ingestion appear relatively limited with low observed prevalence of macro-litter ingestion, however, the

abundance of and potential impacts from microplastic and nanoplastic ingestion are unclear. Impacts from entanglement in abandoned, lost or discarded fishing gear in the UK are also unclear, as such cases can be difficult to differentiate from bycatch in active set gear. For more information on marine litter impacts observed during necropsies of stranded cetaceans see CSIP annual reports which are published at the following link (e.g. Appendix 2 in 2018-2020 annual reports):<https://randd.defra.gov.uk/ProjectDetails?ProjectId=20101>)

In May 2023, the UK launched England's first national Marine and Coastal Wildlife Code which offers advice and guidance to ensure people visiting the coast do so responsibly and minimise disturbance and harm to marine wildlife. It includes specific guidance and links to further advice on cetaceans and how they might react to disturbance.

In January 2023, the UK government published its first revision of the 25 Year Environment Plan, the "Environmental Improvement Plan" (EIP). The EIP acknowledges that concentrations of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) remain high in the marine environment and negatively impact on the reproductive functions and immune systems of cetaceans. It includes a commitment to ensure that all items of equipment that contain PCBs are registered and removed from use by 2025, in line with parties' commitments under the Stockholm Convention.

5. Reporting systems for cetacean injuries/mortality/strandings.

No updates reported.

6. International cooperation activities (includes bilateral or multilateral cooperation, assistance and funding programs and appropriate contact information, and other international activities of the Country submitting the Report).

The UK has increased its leadership role within the IWC by stepping up to Chair of the Conservation Committee and retains its positions as Co-Chair of the Working Group on Operational Effectiveness, Chair of the Voluntary Conservation Fund Steering Group, and Chair of the Intersessional Working Group on Welfare.

Within Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs), the UK has been supportive of efforts to address and where possible minimise the bycatch of cetaceans in fishing gear. When proposals for new measures on these issues were tabled by the Republic of Korea at the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC) in 2022 and the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) in 2023, we proactively supported both proposals, going as far as cosponsoring the proposal at ICCAT, which helped ensure the successful adoption of both.

At CMS COP14 the UK supported a range of cetacean-related conservation measures including Concerted Actions and species listing proposals.

7. Other (at the discretion of the Authority submitting the Report).

The UK's Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (EFRA) Committee undertook an inquiry into issues affecting marine mammals in the UK and around the works to better understand the role that the UK can play in protecting them. The EFRA Committee published a report with

recommendations to the government: “Protecting Marine Mammals in the UK and abroad”.
For more information, including the UK government’s response see:
<https://committees.parliament.uk/work/6670/marine-mammals/publications/>