

Entangled whale freed by fishermen

Footage of successful release shown on Scottish TV

DRAMATIC DRONE footage of a humpback whale being successfully released after it had become entangled in creel ropes off the Isle of Skye was aired on Scottish TV last week.

The young whale had become entangled in a fleet of gear fishing at a depth of 35m northeast of Skye, with the mainline becoming entangled over its tail flukes. The animal was able to reach the surface to breathe, but was, rescuers said, struggling to do so under the weight of gear it was holding up.

Quickly on hand to support the unnamed vessel that had encountered the animal caught in its gear were Scottish Creel Fishermen's Federation co-ordinator Bally Philp, who was fishing nearby, and Haydn MacKenzie, both of whom have been active members of the Scottish Entanglement Alliance (SEA).

SEA runs training courses for Scottish creel fishermen that

By **ANDY READ**

teach ways to minimise risks of entanglement, and also, in the rare event that it does take place, how to resolve the issue safely, and with minimal stress to the animals involved (FN, 14 April, 2022, 'Scots creel fishers proactive in efforts to reduce entanglement').

Using the vessels' pot haulers, the weight of the fleet of gear was taken off the humpback from each side at a safe distance, with the rope swiftly and safely removed from the animal without causing it any lasting damage.

Ellie MacLennan of Glasgow University – who by coincidence grew up on Skye, where her father is a creel fisherman – said on behalf of SEA: "This disentanglement is a great example of the vital role fishermen can and do play in entanglement mitigation, and the importance of understanding not just the animals involved, but also being familiar with the fishing gear and ground.

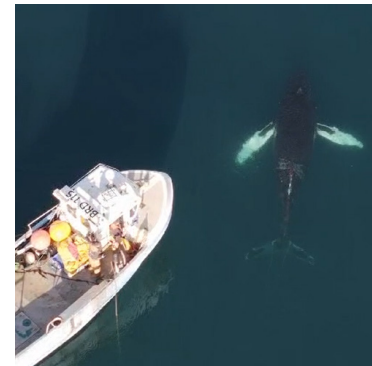
"Thank you to everyone involved in ensuring that this entanglement had a happy outcome."

This was the second humpback entanglement off Skye in as many weeks, with a larger individual becoming entangled in salmon farm ropes, in a much more complicated operation that involved a team of divers from the British Divers Marine Life Rescue. The whale remained entangled overnight, after a complicated assessment of the risk to the animal.

The final operation to rescue the animal found that it had

been carrying other ropes, from a previous entanglement, that then became caught in the fish farm ropes, which themselves wrapped around the animal. It was subsequently released unharmed.

There have been numerous sightings of humpbacks around the UK in recent weeks, from North West Scotland down through the English Channel. Reasons for the increase are thought to include a rising population, recovering from very low numbers globally after whaling was stopped in 1986, and changing distribution of their main food sources – small pelagics such as sardine and anchovy.



▲ Drone footage of the juvenile humpback, as the main backline for the fleet of creels is brought to the surface, a safe distance from the animal. (Photo: Anthony Rigell)

'Sinking rope would likely have avoided this entanglement'

The recent entanglements have renewed calls for wider roll-out of a scheme to see buoyant creel lines replaced by sinking rope, which is negatively buoyant, but much lighter than classic leadlines (FN, 30 May, 2024, 'Sinking rope: a win-win for cetaceans and fishermen').

Monitoring by SEA has shown that 80% of minke whales and 50% of humpback whales that become entangled in creel gear around Scotland had become caught in the rope between creels.

SEA carried out extensive industry-led trials with 15 creel fishermen in North West Scotland between 2022 and 2024 to assess the use of negatively buoyant lines, with very positive results. The ropes performed well, without the snagging or abrasion that was thought a possibility.

A spokesperson for SEA said: "SEA is in the middle of a tour of Scottish coastal areas consulting with local fishermen to gather their input and give

them the opportunity to try sinking rope for themselves.

"This process has been driven by a collaborative, bottom-up approach to addressing entanglement in creel gear, relying heavily on the local expertise of creel fishermen to ensure that they lead any future implementation of sinking rope which may take place. Workshops have so far been held in Arbroath, Mull, Troon, Kirkwall, Lerwick, Benbecula and Harris, with Ullapool and Fraserburgh on 17 and 20 February respectively. It has been very positive talking to fishermen about their concerns and suggestions, which will be the foundations of recommendations on future practical approaches.

"The use of sinking rope would likely have avoided this entanglement, and we hope that this relatively straightforward mitigation for such entanglements can be taken forward and financed in a way that is fair to fishermen.

"Subject to funding,



▲ Creel fishermen undertaking practical training on disentanglement off Ullapool – part of a course run by SEA involving both classroom and at-sea training.

SEA hopes to run more disentanglement training for fishermen to benefit whales and communities throughout Scotland. However, for the sake of both whales and fishermen, preventing entanglements from occurring in the first place is by far the best option, and we look forward to working collaboratively to help make this happen."



▲ The humpback whale trapped on a Skye fish farm was carrying rope from a previous entanglement, complicating the rescue, which took more than 24 hours to effect. Thankfully the animal swam away in good condition, having been completely freed of ropes by a volunteer dive team. (Photo: Anthony Rigell)

Applications open for albacore tuna fishery

Nine UK licences to be issued for 2025

VESSEL OWNERS CAN now apply to the MMO for a licence to catch and land northern albacore tuna in 2025.

The UK has a quota allocation of 663t of albacore, of which 280t may be taken via directed fishing

By **TIM OLIVER**

in EU waters. It can issue nine licences in line with the fishing capacity limitation in ICCAT recommendations.

To be eligible to apply for

a licence in 2025, applicants must:

- Have a domestic commercial fishing licence and be registered in England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland
- If planning to fish in EU waters, hold an external waters licence for access to EU waters
- Use rod and reel, trawl or longline gears
- Agree not to undertake bait chumming.

Applications must be completed on an individual basis per vessel, unless two vessels plan to operate as a pair-trawl team. In that case a single application

for both vessels is appropriate.

Applicants will be required to provide information on their proposed fishing activity and the benefits it will bring to the UK.

A tonnage limit will be set in issued licences, and the amount will depend on the number of applications received and licences issued. The limit may be subject to review and variation.

Applications will be assessed on 'a fair and objective basis to determine the amount of quota to be allocated', says the MMO. Consideration will be given to the environmental, social and economic impacts of proposed fishing activity.

The MMO says it is 'keen to

ensure that licences are issued in a fair manner, recognising the significant investment that certain vessel owners will have made in researching the northern albacore fishery and equipping their vessels to pursue it'. "Applicants should therefore provide evidence of their preparation and ability to participate in the fishery," it says.

Consideration will also be given to an applicant's history of compliance with fishing regulations.

Applications are open now and close at 11.59pm on 4 March.

The application form can be found at: bit.ly/3Evo4aZ