

Scots creel fishers proactive in efforts to reduce entanglement

One of the four nominees shortlisted for The Sustainability Award in this year's Fishing News Awards, the Scottish Entanglement Alliance is a groundbreaking partnership between active fishermen and a range of scientists, regulators and NGOs, reports **Ellie MacLennan**.

Globally, large marine animal entanglement in fishing gear and marine debris is the single most significant marine mammal welfare issue of our time. These incidents have been observed in every ocean basin, and appear to be increasing in many regions.

Around Scotland, a diverse array of marine animals including whales, dolphins, porpoises and basking sharks inhabit inshore waters, which also provide valuable fishing grounds for static and mobile fishers. The Scottish inshore fishing industry makes a significant contribution to the national economy, and forms the social and cultural backbone of many small fragile coastal communities.

However, with thousands of miles of rope and netting associated with these fisheries in the water at any given time, the incidence, severity and range of species impacted by entanglement has been increasing in recent years. Entanglement is the largest identified cause of death due to human activity in minke and humpback whales, and the only known cause of human-driven mortality in basking sharks and marine turtles in Scottish waters.

These incidents can be dangerous for those encountering them, and place a financial burden



▲ **Creel fishers undertaking practical training in Ullapool on disentanglement. The first course of its kind in Scotland, this involved both classroom and practical training.**

on fishers through damaged fishing gear, and lost fishing time and associated catch.

In response to concerns raised about entanglements in Scottish creel fisheries, the Scottish Creel Fishermen's Federation (SCFF) recognised entanglement as a potential issue within its own sector, and the Scottish Entanglement Alliance (SEA) was formed in 2018 as a result, funded by the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund.

The first organisation of its kind in Europe, the SEA brings together commercial fishermen, government advisors, researchers and marine mammal conservation charities. The overarching aims of the project are to engage directly with the inshore creel fleet to determine if marine animal entanglement is perceived to be an issue within the sector, and what the risks and consequences of entanglements are from a conservation, welfare, human safety and economic perspective, and to work towards practical, proportional mitigation measures that will help safeguard the future of both our marine ecosystems and our traditional fisheries.

One hundred and fifty-nine creel fishermen, representing approximately 11% of the commercial fleet, were interviewed about their fishing practices and experiences of entanglement as part of this project. These revealed that entanglements are more prevalent than previously thought, with approximately half of fishermen interviewed having experienced at least one entanglement between 2008 and 2018, and that they affect a wider range of whale, dolphin and shark species than previously thought.

These interviews also highlighted a significant drive from within the industry to address the issue, with over 80% of fishermen suggesting measures that they felt could prevent or reduce the risk of entanglement. These included both 'top-down' legislative and policy change, and 'bottom-up' fisher-led gear trials.

In addition to these interviews, fishermen from around the coast also participated in workshops hosted in Ullapool, London and Plymouth to promote best practice



▲ **Two orca close to static-fishing gear in Orkney. (Photo: Graham Campbell)**

to reduce entanglement risk, and training to safely monitor and disentangle large marine animals from fishing gear.

Bally Philp of the SCFF, who has been heavily involved in the project, said: "The Scottish Creel Fisherman's Federation is proud to have taken part in this study, which is at the forefront of understanding and finding mitigations for tackling the global problem of marine animal entanglement in fishing gear. The project demonstrates that

when an alliance of government, industry, academics and conservation groups collaborates, solutions can be progressed to a degree that would otherwise be hard to achieve.

"We look forward to collaborating with our partners on sourcing funding for the next phase of this project, which will be to research and develop equipment and strategies to reduce entanglement of cetaceans and sharks in our fisheries."

Full findings from the work were published in December 2021, and included information for fishers about simple ways to reduce the risk of entanglement, contact details where fishermen can make a report or ask for help in the event of an entanglement issue, and advice on how best to deal with an entangled animal.

Funding to continue this work into a second phase is currently being sought. The full project report and resources, including a wheelhouse guide to assist fishermen in the event of an entanglement, can be accessed at: bit.ly/37hOM6u

The SEA project partners would like to thank all the fishermen who contributed their time, expertise and advice to this project, without which this work would not have been possible.

The winner of The Sustainability Award, which is sponsored by the Fishmonger's Company's Fisheries Charitable Trust, will be decided by a panel of judges drawn from the fishing industry. ■

GOOD PRACTICE GUIDE FOR FISHERS: reporting and disentangling large marine animals caught in creel gear



Encountering an entanglement

SEA are working together with fishers to identify ways to reduce entanglements without threatening livelihoods.

Marine animal entanglements can have significant impacts to both the animals and fishermen involved. Documentation is key to prevention and so it is important that every incident is reported.

If you encounter an animal entangled in your fishing gear please report this, even if the animal is dead. This information not only improves our understanding of entanglements, but valuable data can be obtained from each incident about the health of both the species involved and the wider marine environment.

Any information you choose to share will be treated sensitively, positively and confidentially.

TO REPORT AN ENTANGLED ANIMAL OR FOR ADVICE AND ASSISTANCE

PLEASE CALL THE SCOTTISH ENTANGLEMENT ALLIANCE (SEA) PARTNERS ON: **07746 634757**
OR CONTACT HM COASTGUARD ON: **VHF CH. 16**

What will happen when you report an entanglement?

You will be asked for details including:

- Date and time found.
- Location.
- Description of the animal and if its alive or dead.
- Description of the entanglement configuration.
- Photos and/or video of the incident.
- If you require any assistance.

We can dispatch a trained disentanglement team to assist you if required, and may be able to put you in contact with other fishers in your area who have undertaken specialised disentanglement training.

www.scottishentanglement.org

Disentangling an animal

We strongly advise against attempting to disentangle a live animal yourself without first seeking advice. However if you choose to do so please consider the following key points:

- Your safety and that of your crew and boat is paramount. Help is available.
- **DO NOT** get into the water. These are wild animals and can be very dangerous and unpredictable.
- **DO NOT** approach the animal directly from behind or head on, and keep noise to a minimum to prevent any further distress.
- Assess the entanglement and identify where and how the animal is caught e.g. around the tail and/or fins, through the mouth etc., before cutting any gear.
- Disentangle from head to tail, cutting any anchoring lines last.
- Ensure all gear is removed from the animal and retrieved.
- **If in any doubt, call for assistance.**
- Report the incident to the Scottish Entanglement Alliance (SEA).

▲ **The first page of the wheelhouse guide for skippers published by the alliance in December 2021. The full guide, and advice on avoiding entanglements, can be downloaded from the SEA website.**



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WHAT: Tickets can be bought individually or as a table of ten

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