

Why the increase in whales

◆ Once endangered because of hunting, the humpback whale has been making a promising comeback to oceans globally, writes Katharine Hay

Increased sightings of the distinctive dorsal fin and the sound of flukes slapping the surface in Scottish waters is testament to the more active migration route of these magnificent mammals. Experts say there are still low densities of the species in Scotland's seas, which they migrate through between their breeding grounds off Africa to their feeding grounds around Iceland and Norway. But an increase in opportunistic observations suggest numbers are growing.

Earlier this month, NatureScot manager David Steel caught site of a humpback off the Isle of May, about 30 miles from Edinburgh, where he documents wildlife. "I have been here for nine years and I've seen three in the last four years," he said. "There has been a noticeable increase in sightings on previous decades."

The clampdown on hunting whales is said to be one of the reasons for the "overspill" of humpbacks to the UK's coastline.

Dr Kevin Robinson, director of the Cetacean Research & Rescue Unit, also cited warmer seas as a reason and "the rich productive waters to the north and north-west of Scotland, which provide a suitable habitat for the magnificent whales which we expect to encounter more and more of."

There are about 135,000 humpback whales globally, according to NatureScot. A report in the Nature journal said the population plummeted to 1,400, or even lower, in the 1960s.

But an increase in human activity at sea has presented the species with a new problem – entanglement. Earlier this month, a juvenile female humpback was found washed up on the banks of Loch Fleet, which is about 45 miles north of Inverness on the Sutherland coast. The Scottish Marine Animal Stranding Scheme (SMASS), which performs autopsies on marine animals, found "clear evidence of acute entanglement". The whale also had older abrasions from previously being caught in netting.

SMASS director Dr Andrew Brownlow said these injuries were common in larger, washed-up marine life, and there had been a "clear increase in the number of entanglement cases".

He said the whale would have likely become trapped in netting, struggled to break free and drowned before washing up on land. Although SMASS said it could not be 100 per cent sure about the origin of the rope, the pattern would be "highly consistent with creel rope".



A report released in December found "considerably more whale entanglements occur in the Scottish creel fishery than previously thought".

The study, which included authors from the University of Glasgow, said estimates of six humpback whales and 30 minke whales – the latter being the most common species of the baleen whale seen off Scotland – become entangled each year. Where entanglement was reported, 83 per cent of minke and 50 per cent of humpback whales were caught in groundlines between creels.

Two minke whales have washed up on the North Berwick coast in the last month, with East Lothian Council saying it now expects about three or four dead whales a year in the area.

Mr Brownlow said while entanglements specific to humpbacks were rare off Scotland, with about 20 being reported in the past decade, alarmingly, 95 per cent of entanglement cases involving large marine animals were likely to go unreported. This can be due to logistical challenges in recovering at-sea carcasses.

Among the cases that are reported to SMASS, he said the main cause of death has been entanglement. "These animals are swimming through a forest of rope. The number of fishing equipment in our waters has increased massively, so there is a major problem with the material out there. There is an urgent need to understand how creel fishing can be mitigated and we urgently need the Scottish Government to help fund us for this."

SMASS and researchers have said there has been a positive, active engagement from Scottish creel fishermen to tackle entanglement cases.

The Scottish Creel Fisherman's



A humpback whale jumps off the coast of Les Saintes, a part of the French west Indies island of Guadeloupe. Below right, a juvenile female humpback was found washed up on the banks of Loch Fleet. Above: Ellie MacLennan

Federation (SCFF) is part of six groups that make up the Scottish Entanglement Alliance (SEA), which launched in 2018, and has spent the past few years trying to better understand the scale and nature of the problem.

SEA has recently started a "sinking ground-lines" trial, funded by NatureScot, which involves swapping out buoyant ropes used in creel fisheries for lead ropes that sink to the seabed, which are said to pose less risk to marine life swimming by. Bally Philp, a creel fisherman based on the isle of Skye, and who is a representative of SCFF, said: "Hopefully it goes without saying there's no creel fisherman who wants to entangle a whale. We are doing everything we can to reduce and ultimately eliminate entanglement as an issue in our fisheries."

Ellie MacLennan, who has been coordinating the SEA project and who is studying a PhD in entanglement



“**These animals are swimming through a forest of rope**

Dr Andrew Brownlow

washing up?

Country Life



Unions said Rishi Sunak's summit showcased a positive outlook for UK food security

Sunak's summit leads to questions on Scotland's support for farmers

◆ Our farmers need long-awaited clarity on funding, writes Katharine Hay



Rishi Sunak held a first of its kind "farm to fork" summit this week to hone in on the UK's supply chain crisis.

Finally, some might sigh, with the price of a weekly basket of adequately nutritious food having increased by 24 to 26 per cent since April last year. And with food prices spiralling to a 45 year high.

Downing Street taking such matters into its own hands was also hugely welcomed by farmers who, according to reports, make less than 1 per cent of profit from their produce currently due to "unfair and extractive supply chains."

The UK's supply chain is already being probed, including one investigation being run in Parliament by the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, and another by the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA).

But the in-person summit, which saw representatives from the food and farming sector, focused on discussions with those directly involved and how to convene the whole supply chain together.

National Farmers Union (NFU) chief Minette Batters and the Scotland

branch chairman Martin Kennedy attended the event which they said showcased "a positive outlook" for food production and improving its supply chain, with "domestic self sufficiency" back on the political agenda; a positive takeaway with the UK currently importing 32 per cent of fruit and vegetables from areas defined as "climate vulnerable", and 54 per cent from countries likely to face high water scarcity by 2040.

Former chief executive of both Scotland Food and Drink and NFU Scotland James Withers praised the prime minister's open letter addressed to "UK farmers" ahead of the summit.

Meanwhile, critics of the event who were "left out", including the Soil Association and the Nature Friendly Farming Network, quite rightly pointed out matters such as how to secure a reliable supply of healthy food at affordable prices, setting animal welfare standards, and how to best use our land to create climate and nature friendly UK farming, should have made it to Sunak's principles for the event.

Despite the overall positive feedback, the event bringing farmer support and food security to the top of the political agenda hasn't assuaged the anxiety over the uncertainty of future funding for farmers north of the border.

All countries in the UK apart from Scotland have a plan to replace EU funding to support farmers once it runs out in the wake of Brexit. Maybe it's time our First Minister wrote an open letter to Scotland's farmers giving them long-awaited clarity on future funding.

