

## **The Fisheries Bill:**

### **Eliminating protected species bycatch in UK waters**

Wildlife and Countryside Link briefing for Lords second reading

February 2020

***The Fisheries Bill should commit to eliminate protected species bycatch.***

**Wildlife and Countryside Link urges the government to put in place in the Fisheries Bill what would be a world-leading objective: the elimination of protected species bycatch within a specified timeframe.** To deliver this, primary legislation should set out clear elimination targets for continual reductions of protected species bycatch, both within UK waters and beyond, where appropriate, and should include timelines for the introduction of measures and achievement of targets.

In UK waters, thousands of marine animals, including harbour porpoises, dolphins, whales, seals and seabirds die every year, as a result of incidental capture and drowning in fishing gear. Recent estimates of the annual UK fisheries toll include over 1,500 harbour porpoise and common dolphin, 400-600 seals, and concerning and increasing levels of entanglements of humpback and minke whales. Additionally, there are seabird bycatch hotspots in some fisheries in UK waters.

#### **The UK as global leaders**

The commitment to produce a UK protected species bycatch strategy provides a welcome and necessary opportunity to position the UK as a world leader, with the most environmentally responsible and animal welfare-friendly fishing fleets. Bycatch of protected species is an avoidable burden on both the populations at risk and the fishing operations responsible. The unwanted bycatch of protected species in fishing gears can have an adverse effect on fishing productivity and profitability, as well as public perception of fishing operations. However, judicious use of mitigation measures and/or alternative gear can prevent such bycatch without reducing fish catch and, in some cases, may even enhance fishing returns and yield economic gains for fishermen. However, without a clear commitment to eliminate bycatch in the Fisheries Bill the bycatch strategy lacks the legal footing required to be effective.

#### **Application to all fisheries operating in UK waters**

The UK's exit from the EU provides the opportunity for the UK to position itself as the most environmentally responsible and welfare-friendly nation wherever its vessels operate and to apply the same standards to foreign vessels fishing in UK waters. This would provide a level playing field for UK fishermen and help drive improved standards elsewhere. To achieve this bycatch needs legislative underpinning in the Fisheries Bill that will ensure it is enforceable and provide permanence and certainty.

#### **Adequate levels of protected species bycatch monitoring**

The level of observer coverage of UK-registered vessels is less than 1% and there is no bycatch data for non-UK fleets fishing in UK waters. As a result, our understanding of the true extent of the levels of bycatch of protected species is extremely low. To date, very little priority has been given to addressing bycatch effectively, particularly on smaller vessels. This needs to change, as without a true

understanding of the scale and nature of the problem, mitigating it is significantly challenging and thousands of animals will continue to be bycaught and killed. Installation of Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) with cameras would improve our understanding of the true scale of the bycatch problem, allow effective monitoring of mitigation efforts and also incentivise compliance.

**Wildlife and Countryside Link's recommendation**

Wildlife and Countryside Link urge the government to put in place in the Fisheries Bill what would be a world-leading objective: the elimination of protected species bycatch within a specified timeframe.

We would welcome contributions from peers in the debate to raise this important issue and to ask the Minister how the government proposes to effectively address this in the Fisheries Bill.

For more information, please contact:

Sarah Dolman, Policy manager, Whale and Dolphin Conservation

Bycatch sub-group Chair, Wildlife and Countryside Link

e: [sarah.dolman@whales.org](mailto:sarah.dolman@whales.org)

m: 078 3449 8275