

Reduce by-catch of harbour porpoises



North Sea EcoQO

Annual by-catch levels of harbour porpoises should be reduced to below 1.7% of the best population estimate.

What is the problem?

By-catch of harbour porpoises in fisheries

Photo: ©Jan Halters

What is the Ecological Quality Objective (EcoQO)?

Harbour porpoises (*Phocoena phocoena*) are small cetaceans found in coastal waters throughout the OSPAR area, which are protected under the EU Habitats Directive. This species is occasionally by-caught by several types of fisheries, especially those using bottom-set gill- and tangle nets. The nets are otherwise considered to be relatively selective and environmentally friendly and their use is increasing.

By-catch rates higher than the EcoQO are considered to be unacceptable, as they are likely to affect the population size of the harbour porpoise in the long term. The EcoQO aims to reduce by-catch in the North Sea to a level that would allow the population to recover to at least 80% of the ecosystem's long-term carrying capacity for this species.

Has the EcoQO been met?

There is no reliable information on by-catch numbers in the North Sea, as monitoring programmes are lacking in most gillnet fisheries. In the southern North Sea, up to half of stranded porpoises have been killed incidentally in fishing gear, a rate that justifies concern. Further independent monitoring of by-catch must be implemented, through compulsory observer schemes. A second challenge in evaluating whether the EcoQO has been met is the need for a better understanding of the status and inter-relationships of North Sea harbour porpoise population units. Accurate estimates of the porpoise population and abundance numbers are required for all areas in which they occur.

How does this affect the quality status?

The harbour porpoise is an important top predator in the North-East Atlantic and there have been historical declines in some areas. As higher species in the food chain harbour porpoises play an important role in food web structure and ecosystem functioning. Incidental removal of such species can lead to cascading ecological changes.

What happens next?

The EcoQO highlights the need for management measures. A first priority is to monitor the by-catch of harbour porpoises effectively. This should be done in cooperation with national and EU fisheries authorities and in collaboration with ASCOBANS. Where by-catch needs to be reduced, a number of actions are possible. Catches of marine mammals in the North Sea are now always incidental. Most fishermen do not want such by-catch, not least because of gear damage and slower fishing operations. However, individual fishermen rarely catch a harbour porpoise and so may not consider this a significant environmental problem.

National reports of harbour porpoise by-catch around the North Sea in 2006

Country	Observation
Norway	101 harbour porpoises were reported caught by 18 coastal gillnet vessels between October 2005 and September 2006
Sweden	No report received
Denmark	No report received
Germany	No report received
Netherlands	No report received
Belgium	Report provided is based on numbers of stranded harbour porpoises showing net marks; 32 such porpoises were recorded in 2006. There has been an increase in strandings (and by-catch), probably due to an increase in numbers of porpoises in Belgian waters
France	Report for EU Regulation 812/2004 covered only pelagic fisheries. No harbour porpoises were reported caught in these fisheries
UK	No harbour porpoise by-catch was observed in the North Sea, but 14 animals were reported for the south-west of the UK (including in areas outside the North Sea as defined by OSPAR)

Pingers (acoustic alarms) have been seen as one of the most promising prevention measures. EU Regulation 812/2004 makes these compulsory for bottom-set gill- and tangle nets operated from vessels of 12 m length or over, excluding many smaller vessels. Pingers have been applied under Danish law in cod wreck net fisheries since 2000 and are being trialled elsewhere in the North Sea. However, there are still concerns about their practicality and effectiveness over the long term, about negative impacts from the noise

they emit and about the best means of enforcing their use. Designing effective measures must take account of local conditions and fishing practices, and must use the expertise and experience of fishermen, who currently have little to gain in providing information on by-catch, with killing and landing of harbour porpoises being forbidden in several jurisdictions. All Contracting Parties need to improve the internal coherence between environmental commitments and decisions being taken in relation to the fishing industry.



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