

ANIMAL WELFARE & OCEAN BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION

14 LIFE BELOW WATER



Animal welfare neglect and the continued oversight of ocean biodiversity conservation issues jeopardise SDG14 targets on marine pollution (14.1), ecosystem protection (14.2), overfishing (14.4), protected areas (14.5) and sustainable use (14.7).

100+ mn

sharks are killed every year in targeted fisheries and as bycatch despite their ecological importance

~90%

projected decline in coral reefs by 2050, despite supporting >25% of marine species

700+

marine species, including whales, dolphins & turtles, affected by marine debris, through entanglement or ingestion of plastic pollution

CHALLENGES

Unsustainable fishing practices (e.g. overfishing, bycatch, destructive gear), drives marine biodiversity loss and harms animal welfare.



Limited capacity to enforce legal obligations in many countries, as well as Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing.



Other human-induced threats including noise, plastic and chemical pollution, habitat loss, reductions in prey and climate change.



Marine biodiversity governance is scattered across many treaties with gaps in scope or enforcement, and little attention to animal welfare.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Fishers should be encouraged to transition from high-risk gear towards alternative, lower impact gear to reduce/eliminate bycatch.

Stronger monitoring & enforcement can be supported by tools like remote electronic monitoring and observer programs to detect and deter unsustainable practices.

More research is needed on animal welfare's role in ocean sustainability, identify welfare-friendly alternatives, and provide the evidence for change.

Animal welfare principles should be included in a coherent approach in conservation at national and international levels, and advocated for in key bodies like RFMOs, CMS and CITES.

INTERNATIONAL POLICY GUIDANCE

- **CMS** has published multiple guidelines that intersect animal welfare considerations with marine conservation and sustainable development, including most recently the **International Guidelines for Sustainable Marine Wildlife Interactions: Boat-based and In-water Activities**.
- The **FAO** has begun to incorporate animal welfare in discussions on bycatch reduction and its **Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries**, indirectly addresses the issue by promoting non-lethal and selective fishing to minimise bycatch and waste.
- The **IWC** has developed the **Whale Watching Handbook** to help the industry develop in a way that considers cetacean welfare and is sustainable in the long-term for both cetacean populations and those that depend on their presence.
- The **EU** drives high standards in marine policy and trade that address welfare issues, recently implementing a **temporary fishing ban in the Bay of Biscay** due to the high levels of small cetacean bycatch and mortality.



CASE STUDY: HOW SCOTLAND ADDRESSES BYCATCH

Each year, **over 300,000 whales, dolphins and porpoises die from bycatch**, with serious welfare and conservation impacts.

In **Scotland**, the **creel fishery**, which is vital for many small coastal communities, uses long lines of pots to catch crab, lobster, and langoustine. The ropes connecting these pots pose entanglement risks, with an estimated that **30 minke whales and 6 humpback whales caught annually in Scottish waters**.

To address this, fishers **have trialled sinking groundline rope**, which lies on the seabed rather than floating between pots. In around 15 months and over 1500 hauls, fishers using the sinking groundline often preferred the modified gear, and reported **no bycatch incidents**.

This shows that simple solutions to reduce entanglement risk are available, and the much-needed **transition towards alternative, lower impact gear** can be achieved in collaboration with fishers to improve sustainable development.



SCAN FOR SOURCES & REFERENCES

All WFA policy recommendations are evidence-based — ensuring better outcomes for people, animals, and the planet.