Wildly Unforgiving

Dangers of Drift Gillnets off the California Coast

The Problem:

Drift gillnets targeting swordfish off California entrap and kill ocean wildlife

Mile-long drift gillnets are set at night in ocean waters off California to target swordfish and thresher sharks, but they create deadly traps for iconic ocean wildlife. More than 70 non-target species of marine life including many types of whales, dolphins, seals, sea lions, sea turtles, sharks, tunas, marlins, and other fish drown or become critically injured in these nets. This fishery catches and throws back more marine life than it keeps, discarding approximately 62 percent of the catch on average from 2004-2017.[1] Nearly one quarter of the animals caught as bycatch and pulled from the nets are dead and the fate of surviving animals that are released is unknown. Drift gillnets also kill fish that are highly important to California recreational fishermen and recreational fishing jobs.

According to a recent National Marine Fisheries Service study,[2] between 2001 and 2015, the California-based swordfish drift gillnet fishery caught:

- 753 dolphins
- 507 seals and sea lions
- 112 seabirds
- 53 whales
- 35 sea turtles

All dolphins were killed, and only a handful of the large whales, turtles and sea lions escaped without serious injury or death. In addition, more than 140,000 fish, including tens of thousands of sharks were thrown overboard.

Cover photo: short beak common dolphin (*Delphinus delphis*) caught and killed in a California swordfish drift gillnet © NOAA

This drift gillnet fishery is the only fishery on the U.S. West Coast with Category I status under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, the federal designation reserved for fisheries that have the highest incidence of entangling and killing marine mammals.

Management of this West Coast swordfish fishery is drastically falling behind the global curve of responsible fishery management. Swordfish drift gillnets are banned in the Mediterranean Sea and on the high seas, have been phased out off the U.S. East Coast, and are not permitted by Oregon or Washington states. In July 2015, Russia became the next country in a long list of regions worldwide to prohibit the use of drift gillnets due to bycatch concerns.

In 1985 there were 228 drift gillnets vessels.[3] This number dwindled to fewer than 20 vessels actively fishing in 2016.[4]

In September 2015, after a years-long process incorporating input from fishery stakeholders, the Pacific Fishery Management Council —a 14-voting member advisory body with industry, state, and tribal representatives— recommended that the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) increase bycatch monitoring to 100 percent and set hard caps on the

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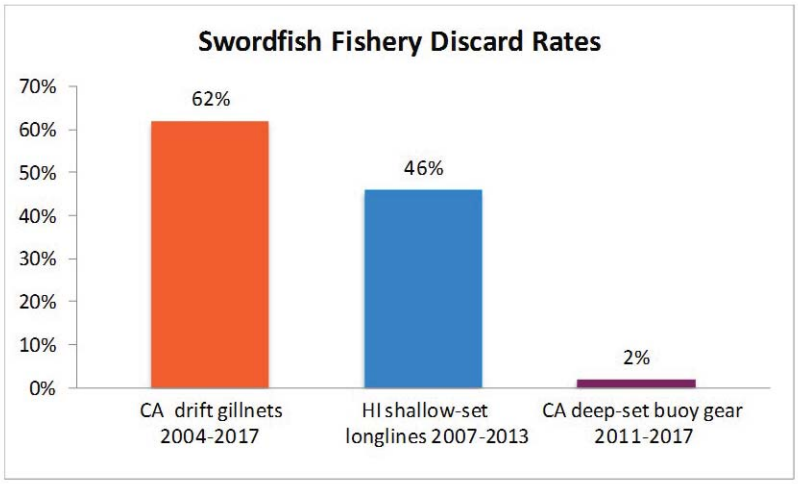

Discard rates (percentage of the total number of animals caught that are thrown overboard) are provided for different U.S. fisheries gear types that target swordfish in the Pacific Ocean. Discards include live and dead discards, however the fate of most live discards after release remains unknown. CA DGN= California drift gillnet; HI SSLL= Hawaii shallow-set longline;[5] CA DSBG= California deep-set buoy gear.[6]

injury and mortality of nine sea turtle and marine mammal species most at risk from entanglement in swordfish drift gillnets. If these hard caps were reached, the fishery would close for the remainder of the season.

The hard caps would have applied to endangered fin, humpback, and sperm whales, short-fin pilot whales, and common bottlenose dolphins; as well as endangered leatherback, loggerhead, olive ridley, and green sea turtles. NMFS released a draft rule for public comment in October 2016. In an unprecedented move, the new federal administration withdrew the proposed rule in June 2017 and chose not to propose a rule to require 100 percent monitoring. In doing so, the National Marine Fisheries Service ignored the will of its federal fishery advisors, the State of California, California state legislators and Congressional members, and the more than 58,000 members of the public who weighed in to support these caps. In response, Congress must pass legislation prohibiting swordfish drift gillnets off the U.S. West Coast once and for all and encourage the transition to cleaner gears.

1. National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Observer Program drift gillnet fishery catch and discard data. Available: http://www.westcoast.fisheries.noaa.gov/fisheries/wc_observer_programs/sw_observer_program_info/data_summ_report_sw_observer_fish.html

2. Carretta JV, Moore JE, Forney KA (2017) Regression tree and ratio estimates of marine mammal, sea turtle, and seabird bycatch in the California drift gillnet fishery: 1990-2015. NOAA Technical Memorandum, NOAA-TM-NMFS-SWFSC-568. 83 p. Tables 4-39.

3. NMFS (2013) Biological Opinion on the continued management of the drift gillnet fishery under the Fishery Management Plan for U.S. West Coast Fisheries for Highly Migratory Species (May 2, 2013). At, 9, Table 1.

4. NMFS (2017) MMPA List of Fisheries. 82 Fed. Reg. 3,655, 3,663 (January 12, 2017)

5. NOAA Hawaii shallow-set longline Observer Program Data, 2007-2013 received via Freedom of Information Act Request in 2015

6.Pfleger Institute of Environmental Research (PIER). Deep-set buoy gear trials and exempted fishing permit results. Available: http://www.pcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/H3a_Att2_PIER_MAR2015BB.pdf and http://www.pcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/J2_Att2_PIER_2015-16_DSBG_EFP_SummaryRpt_Mar2017BB.pdf

The Solution:

End drift gillnets and transition to cleaner fishing gears

Deep-set buoy gear and harpoons are gear types that catch swordfish with far less bycatch than drift gillnets or pelagic longlines. Experiments with deep-set buoy gear indicate economic profitability, active gear tending which allows quick release and minimal mortality to untargeted animals, high selectivity at targeting swordfish based on daytime sets at swordfish feeding depths, and potential to scale up swordfish catches with low bycatch.[6]

Additionally, harpoons are currently a legal and historically proven gear type that target swordfish in a more sustainable manner where products also earn substantially higher prices in the marketplace relative to drift gillnet-caught swordfish. Harpoons can be used in addition to deep-set buoy gear.

Pelagic longlines are already prohibited by state and federal law off California due to extremely high bycatch. It is imperative that this remain a prohibited gear type.

Now is the time to switch to alternative gear types that catch swordfish in a way that is safer for marine life.

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