THE NET CONSEQUENCE:
Impacts of Set Gillnets on California Ocean Biodiversity

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Southern California ocean waters are some of the most productive and diverse in the world. Marine mammals, sharks, rays, skates, fish, and seabirds that migrate, feed, and reproduce in the dynamic ocean waters of this region all share a common threat: the risk of becoming entangled in set gillnet fishing gear used to catch California halibut and white seabass. These nearly invisible nets can be as long as the Golden Gate Bridge, are anchored to the seafloor, and indiscriminately catch more than 125 different species of ocean animals. Most animals thrown overboard are already dead or dying — raising significant concerns over the fishery's impact on California's marine biodiversity.

California voters and fishery managers banned this indiscriminate and destructive gear in nearshore waters, resulting in major rebounds in vulnerable fish and marine mammal populations. Yet these nets are still allowed in offshore waters and around islands off Southern California where they are injuring and killing marine wildlife.

Sixty-four percent of all animals caught are thrown overboard, and of those more than half are dead before they hit the water. This is among the highest discard rates — by number of animals — of any fishery in the country.

Seventy-three percent of sharks, skates, and rays caught are tossed overboard. These species are extremely important in marine ecosystems and vulnerable to overfishing.

Set gillnets are the primary threat to juvenile great white sharks in their nursery grounds off California. White sharks play an important ecosystem role and their population is still at low numbers.

Gray whales and federally threatened and endangered populations of humpback whales are susceptible to entanglement in set gillnets.

More California sea lions are killed annually by set gillnets than all other observed West Coast fisheries combined.

Set gillnets are still allowed to keep giant seabass, despite decades long closures of the commercial and recreational fisheries due to population depletion.

Set gillnets throw back young halibut before they can reproduce, impacting other halibut fisheries.

Management tools are available to reduce bycatch in California's set gillnet fishery and a more selective hook and line fishing method is already well-established. The California Fish and Game Commission must address the needless waste set gillnets inflict on California's marine environment, to ensure that the unique ocean ecosystem off California can continue to thrive and support sustainable fishing communities.

For the full report and references please visit:
oceana.org/keepcaoceansthriving
seaturtles.org/set-gillnets

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