

The use of driftnets by the Moroccan fleet



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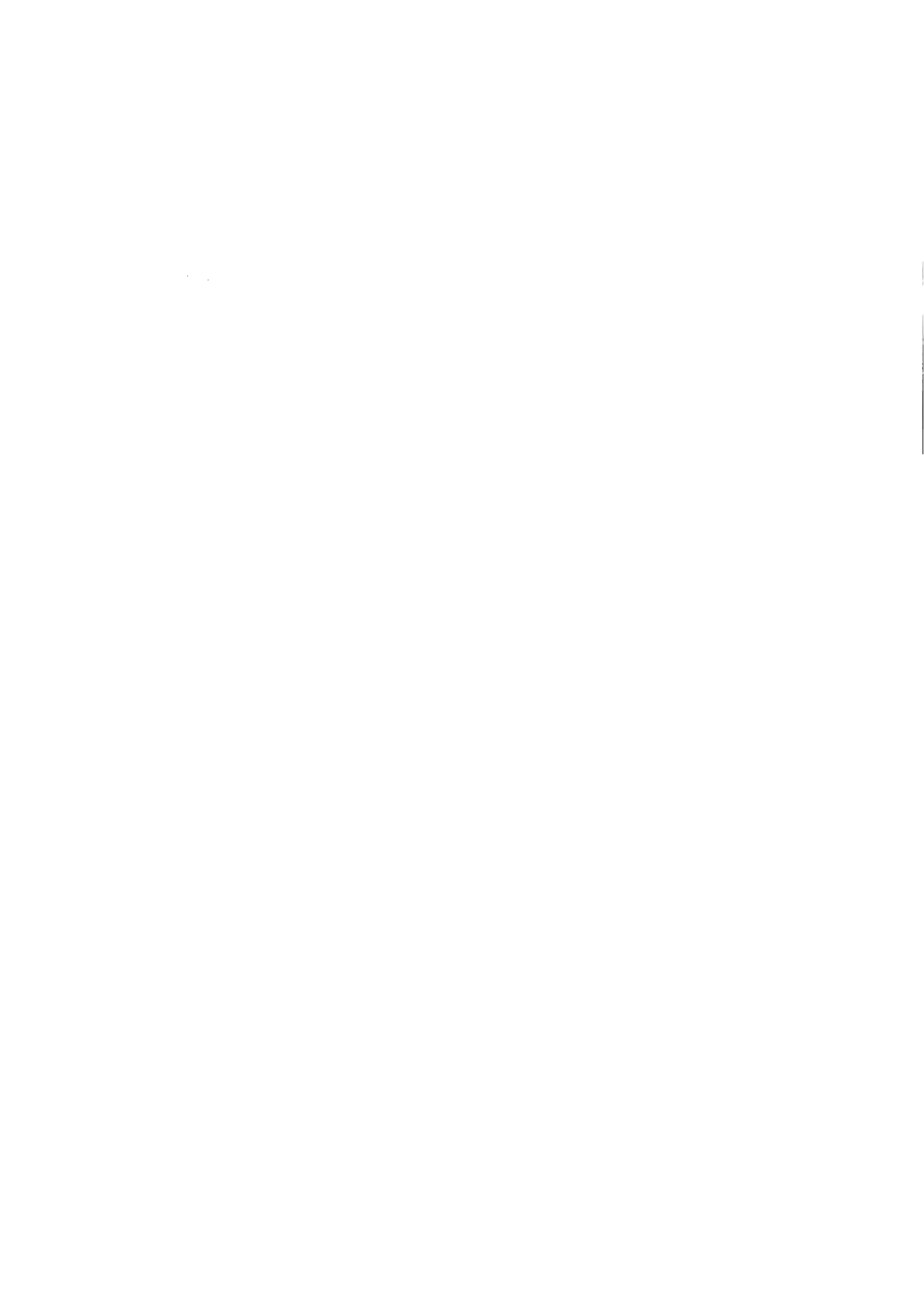
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© OCEANA/Juan Cuetos. Activity on board a Moroccan driftnetter. Alboran Sea, August 2006.



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Executive summary

Driftnets have been condemned by the international community and banned by various countries and different international organisations. This fishery, however, still continues in various countries around the world, causing the accidental capture and death of a large number of cetaceans, sea turtles, elasmobranchs and birds.

One of the epicentres of this fishing activity is located in the Mediterranean Sea. This sea was considered "legally" free of driftnets when, in the summer of 2005, and after being banned by various administrations, the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM) adopted a binding resolution where driftnets of any length were prohibited for capturing large migratory species. Compliance with these agreements, however, is far from effective. Countries such as Italy, France, Morocco, Turkey and Algeria are still using this fishing gear, making up a Mediterranean fleet of more than 500 vessels.

As part of its 2006 Campaign Oceana travelled for three months on board the *Oceana Ranger* research vessel in order to document and report the most significant driftnet fleets in the Mediterranean Sea. Within this context, the Moroccan fleet is the most notorious due to the number of vessels, as well as the particular international context in which the fleet operates. During the trip, this fleet's usual fishing areas were identified and the fishing activities and catches of three Moroccan driftnetters on the high seas, with nets measuring up to 12 kilometres in length were filmed and documented.

Furthermore, the Moroccan ports of Tangiers, Nador and Alhucemas were inspected in order to evaluate the size of the fleet. The Moroccan driftnet fleet fishing in the Straits of Gibraltar and the Alboran Sea is estimated at 150 vessels, although this number may increase considerably according to the season.

Since countries of the European Union, especially Spain, are the destination points of almost 98% of the swordfish caught by the Moroccan driftnet fleet, and given that these countries have committed to giving financial aid for the conversion of this illegal fleet, Oceana proposes a series of recommendations to the relevant authorities in order to enforce compliance with the GFCM prohibition, so that the international support given for the elimination of these nets is definitive, effective and real.



Driftnets at the port of Nador. August, 2006.

Introduction

Driftnetting is a passive fishing method that uses nets measuring various kilometres in length and up to 30 metres in height, which are allowed to float freely, or are attached to the corresponding fishing vessel. These nets are used mainly to catch different species of tuna, swordfish, salmon or cephalopods. Due to the high number of accidental captures, comprised mostly of endangered species, these nets have been condemned by the international community and banned by various countries and organisations both regionally and internationally.

In 1989, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA)¹ approved a resolution proposing a moratorium on the high seas for all oceans and seas, including closed and semi-closed seas, to come into force on 31 December 1992. The resolution constituted one of the first initiatives that would later lead to international agreements, recommendations and regulations geared toward making this prohibition effective, not only on the high seas, but also in territorial waters and Exclusive Economic Zones.

Since then, organisations such as the International Whaling Commission (IWC)², the International Commission for the Scientific Exploration of the Mediterranean Sea (CIESM)³, and the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA)⁴ have taken measures to eliminate this fishing gear. However, the continued use of driftnets in various countries despite international pressure and, in many cases current regulations, as well as the addition of new fleets that traditionally had never used driftnets, calls into question the effectiveness of these agreements and indeed of any of the measures adopted concerning fisheries management, if these are not accompanied by mechanisms that guarantee their implementation.

In 1991, a report compiled by the FAO⁵ provided evidence of the existence of these destructive driftnet fleets in the majority of the oceans around the world. Japan, Taiwan, China and South Korea continue to fish Pacific salmon and cephalopods with driftnets in areas of the northern Pacific⁶ today.

The Mediterranean has a number of regulations and measures adopted for the elimination of this fishing gear, making it a challenging area for the enforcement of a ban and an indicator of the applicability of international measures adopted in fisheries management.

Within the framework of the measures adopted for the elimination of this fishing gear in the Mediterranean, in 1997⁷ the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM) approved a binding resolution prohibiting the use of driftnets measuring over 2.5 kilometres. Years later, the International Commission for the Conservation of the Atlantic Tuna (ICCAT)⁸ issued a recommendation to its member states to prohibit the fishing of large pelagic species with driftnets of any length. When this recommendation was incorporated by the GFCM⁹, the use of any driftnet in the Mediterranean became an Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated fishing activity (IUU) as defined by the FAO¹⁰.



© OCEANA/Juan Cuetos. Unidentified Italian driftnetter, fishing. Tyrrhenian Sea, July 2006.

Introduction

It has been proven, however, that countries such as Morocco, Turkey, Algeria¹¹, and possibly Libya, all member countries of the GFCM and ICCAT, are still using these types of nets. Currently, it is estimated that approximately 500 vessels are fishing large pelagic species with driftnets in Mediterranean waters today¹².

Despite the establishment 4 years ago of an EU Regulation prohibiting the use of these nets by any EU flagged vessel, control measures have proved to be insufficient to eliminate them. It is calculated that a minimum of 150 vessels to use this fishing gear in the Tyrrhenian Sea, the Ligurian Sea and the Gulf of Lions.

Furthermore, Turkey currently has a fleet of between 100 and 150 driftnetters fishing for swordfish in the Aegean Sea, accidentally capturing striped dolphins (*Stenella coeruleoalba*), bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) and Risso's dolphins (*Grampus griseus*)¹⁴. The delimitation of territorial waters between Greece and Turkey in the Aegean Sea, consisting of only 6 nautical miles for each country, is an added problem in the fight to eliminate this fishing gear because the same fishing area is subject to different legal restrictions as far as the use of driftnets is concerned. This is why it is necessary to enforce compliance to international agreements, because currently it is the only way to ensure that non-EU countries will eliminate these fleets from the Mediterranean Sea.

In Morocco's case, a minimum of 150 illegal driftnetters continue to fish in the waters of the Straits of Gibraltar and the Alboran Sea. The Moroccan government has developed a four-year plan for the conversion of the fleet. Its effectiveness, along with the implementation of necessary control measures, may create a precedent that will lead to the definitive elimination of this fishing gear from the Mediterranean Sea.

Morocco's case

In 1991⁵, driftnet fishing in Morocco was a traditional coastal fishery carried out by 30 vessels. During the 1990s, more than 300 longliners were incorporated into the driftnet fleet, fishing for swordfish (*Xiphias gladius*) in the Moroccan Mediterranean. There were two main reasons for this:

- The growing demand for swordfish in European markets.
- The progressive prohibition of the use of driftnets in the European Union.

In 1992, the member states of the European Union restricted the length of driftnets to a maximum of 2.5 kilometres¹⁵, marking the beginning of the gradual removal of this fishing gear that would culminate in Resolution 894/1997¹⁶, establishing the ban on the use of driftnets in community waters and for vessels belonging to member states, that would come into effect on 1 January 2002. During this process of conversion, the supply of driftnets on the market increased, along with a decrease in prices, making them more affordable for non-EU fishermen.

Consequently, as the EU fleet reduced the number of vessels dedicated to driftnet fishing, the Moroccan fleet increased the number of longliners incorporated into the driftnet fishery both seasonally and permanently during the 1990s¹⁷.

Currently, most of the swordfish caught in the Moroccan Mediterranean is done so using driftnets, although according to different sources, this fishery is in decline due to the introduction of a conversion plan to reconvert the fleet back to longlining.

There are still doubts, however, as to the real size of the fleet today. In 2003, it was estimated that 370 vessels were using this fishing gear¹⁸. That same year, a study carried out by WWF¹⁹ estimated that there were 177 vessels. Furthermore, other sources affirm that in 2004 there were 300 vessels fishing with driftnets in Morocco²⁰, attributing only 38% of national catch to the use of these nets.

The differences that exist as to the evaluation of the size of the fleet may be due to the fact that all the Moroccan driftnetters are also longliners. According to the FAO profile of Morocco, it is estimated that the Moroccan fleet is made up of 971 longliners. Of these, an unknown percentage use driftnets either permanently or seasonally. There is evidence that even vessels from the Atlantic coast of Morocco may join this fishery during the high season.

The differences between the current data available make it necessary to carry out more studies regarding the size of the fleet and volume of the driftnet catches, in order to ensure that measures adopted to eliminate the driftnet fleet are effective. Furthermore, any intervention to definitively eliminate this illegal fishery is quite difficult as long as the demand for swordfish continues to grow in the European markets and as long as there exists a marked difference in profitability between this illegal fishery and traditional longlining.



© OCEANA/Juan Cuetos. The driftnetter *El Farsioui*. Alboran Sea, August 2006.

The legal framework for the use of driftnets in the Morocco

The international agreements subscribed to by Morocco determine the illegality of the use of driftnets both in territorial waters and on the high seas. Within the terms defined by the FAO, this fishery is included in the parameters of Illegal, Unregulated and Unreported (IUU) fishing. However, and as we will later see, practically all the swordfish caught by this fleet circulates within legal marketing channels bound for the European market.

The use of driftnets in Morocco was temporarily regulated in the early 1990s by various ministerial notifications²¹ that limited the maximum length of nets to 2.5 kilometres, and established a minimum mesh size of 400 mm. Furthermore, a regulation on the minimum size of swordfish was established by a 1988²² ministerial decree determining a minimum length of 120 cm and minimum weight of 25 kg, allowing a 15% margin of tolerance.

Morocco has admitted that there are longlining vessels that carry out this illegal fishery in its fleet. More specifically, in 2003, during an annual meeting of ICCAT where a recommendation for the prohibition of the use of driftnets was approved, Morocco informed of the existence of 370 longliners who carry this fishery²³.

In 2004, at the fourteenth meeting of ICCAT in New Orleans²⁴, Morocco presented a four-year plan for the elimination of these types of nets. This plan is arranged in four stages:

Stage I (2004): Promotion of sector awareness

Stage II (2005): Prohibition of the importing of driftnets

Stage III (2005-2008): Conversion, recycling and training of fishermen

Stage IV (end of 2008): Preparation for the coming into effect of the decree prohibiting the use of driftnets and implementation of control measures. Publication of a new notification restricting the use of the nets to 2.5 kilometres in length and a minimum mesh size of 400 mm.

Theoretically, this plan should conclude with the prohibition of the use of driftnets on 1 January 2009.

Both the United States and the European Union have offered financial aid to Morocco to assist with the elimination of this fishing gear. Furthermore, the government of the United States has maintained negotiations with Morocco since 2004²⁵ to cooperate on the plan to eliminate driftnets. Currently (in November 2006), a bilateral agreement between the United States and Morocco²⁶ for environmental cooperation is pending. The cooperation between these countries for compliance with international legislation regarding driftnets is included in the agreement.

Furthermore, the recently approved Fisheries Agreement between the European Union and Morocco²⁷ includes an annual grant of 1.25 million Euros as a contribution to the programme for the elimination of driftnets.

Characteristics of the fishery

The migration of swordfish between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea make the Straits of Gibraltar and the Alboran Sea an exceptional place for this fishery. Morocco has the second largest catch of swordfish in the Mediterranean, after Italy²⁸.

Manufactured mainly in Korea, driftnets are comprised of panels of netting measuring approximately 100 metres in length and up to 30 metres high, with polystyrene floats attached to the headrope to keep the net near the surface of the water and a weighted leadline that keeps the rig vertical in the water column. Depending on the fishing season, various panels are joined together to create a fleet of nets reaching an average length of 3 to 4 kilometres and with a mesh size of 400 mm²⁹. However Oceana observed that the total length of nets found on the high seas can reach up to 12 kilometres. Moreover each net piece observed on the quayside in Nador was often over 3 kilometres long, leading to the conclusion that the average length of the nets used at sea is far higher.



© OCEANA/Juan Cuetos. Typical buoy used to indicate a driftnet. Alboran Sea, August 2006.

According to information provided to ICCAT by the Moroccan government, the typical Moroccan driftnetter is usually a wooden vessel, measuring approximately 10 metres in length, weighing 8 GRT and with 80 horsepower (hp) engines. However, a large percentage of the vessels observed by Oceana exceed this both in length and tonnage. The size of the nets used in relation to the size of the vessels indicates that the engines must be more than 80 hp.

According to Oceana's observations, the vessels have a net hauler mounted on the port side, and sometimes a hydraulic winch located on the starboard side, used to provide more traction when hauling in the nets. The average number of crew members on board a driftnetter is ten. This high number of people may be due to the system of payments used in this fishery. The system allocates 50% of the benefits obtained from the catch to the shipowner, and the other 50% is shared among the crew members, regardless of the number of fishermen on board.

The nets are set at nightfall and hauled in during the early hours of the morning, and then the vessel usually returns to port. However, if catches are good or if the vessel is too far from port, they may stay up to three days in the fishing area.



© OCEANA/Juan Cuetos. Headline of floats of a driftnet in the Port of Nador. August 2006.

Once the net is set, a beacon is attached to one end of the net by means of a buoy equipped with a red flashing light, followed by flashes of orange or yellow lights, usually topped with a metallic radar reflector and a flashing lamp, placed at intervals of one nautical mile. The direction of the driftnet is easily determined thanks to this system of beacons. Usually, when the net is in the water, it is attached to the corresponding vessel and allowed to float along with it. Sometimes, however, the nets are allowed to float freely with the currents.

The Moroccan driftnet fleet carries out its activity mainly in the Straits of Gibraltar and the Alboran Sea. These two distinctly different areas, both exceptional for their biological characteristics, should be considered separately when looking at the characteristics of the driftnet fleets that operate there, due to the differences in the size of the fleets, size of the fish caught, and their repercussions on the fishery.

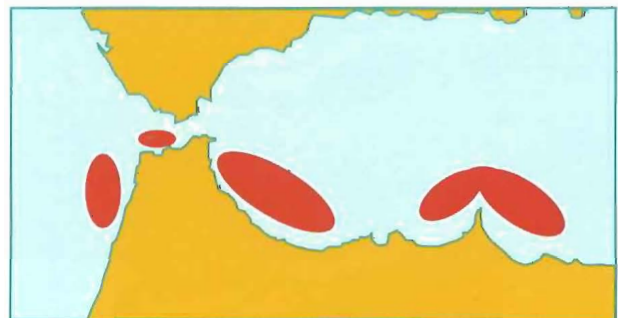
The fleet operating in the Straits of Gibraltar is distinctly seasonal, beginning the fishing season for swordfish toward the end of March and ending in November¹⁷. The fleet operating in the Alboran Sea, generally continues to fish all year.



© OCEANA/Juan Cuctos. Net hauler and winch mounted on a Moroccan driftnetter. Alboran Sea, August 2006.

Oceana's work

During August 2006, Oceana checked the characteristics and size of this illegal fleet as part of its campaign against the use of driftnets in the Mediterranean Sea. The activities of various vessels was documented and filmed on the high seas. Furthermore, investigators visited the three main ports along the Moroccan Mediterranean coast in order to determine the approximate size of the fleet, and to confirm the bibliographic information available. As a result, they estimated that 150 vessels continue to operate in the waters of the Straits of Gibraltar and the Alboran Sea.



Areas of swordfish fishery (*Xiphias gladius*) of the Moroccan driftnetter fleet. Source: FAO COPEMED, 1998.

The fleet in the Straits of Gibraltar

The Straits of Gibraltar, an area where the waters of the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean converge, is an area where large pelagic species have traditionally been fished because it is a natural "funnel", measuring 14 kilometres at its most narrow section, and is an obligatory passageway for migratory fish on their way to and from the Mediterranean. This is where the majority of the Moroccan driftnet fleet carries out its activities, operating mainly from the port of Tangiers.

It is estimated that 67% of the Moroccan driftnet fleet has its base port in Tangiers³⁰, fishing on the high seas in the area between Cabo Sebta and Cabo Espartel and the Atlantic side of the Straits. Due to the short distance between the coasts of Spain and Morocco, these vessels often carry out their activities in or near Spanish territorial waters, sometimes venturing into the Traffic Separation Scheme of the Straits of Gibraltar. These vessels are detected by Spanish security systems and are sometimes sanctioned. However, in 2005, only 9 infringement proceedings were carried out against Moroccan driftnetters for illegally fishing in Spanish territorial waters³¹. Navigational safety warnings are issued by radio, advising about the presence of a large number of these nets, which constitute a threat for maritime traffic. On 19 August 2006, the *Oceana Ranger* crew witnessed one of these warnings issued by Tarifa traffic, alerting ships about the position of a large number of nets approximately 8 nautical miles from the Spanish coast, and warning those sailing through the Straits of Gibraltar to take the necessary precautions to avoid getting the nets caught in their propellers.



Driftnetter docked at the port of Tangiers, with a bundle of nets ready on the dock. October 2006.



Driftnets on the docks of the port of Tangiers. October 2006.

In order to evaluate the activity level of this fleet in the Traffic Separation Scheme in the Straits of Gibraltar, Oceana asked the Spanish Maritime Safety department for the driftnet warnings register for this area. Even though this is public information, Oceana's request was denied.

Oceana investigators inspected the port of Tangiers to evaluate the characteristics and size of the fleet. Due to the fact that driftnetters are also used for other fisheries, and that the majority of the vessels did not have the nets on board, it was impossible to determine the exact number of driftnetters at this port. It was confirmed that at least 32 vessels use Tangiers as their base port, although the actual number of vessels involved in this illegal fishery is much higher, due to both the large quantities of driftnets ready and waiting on the docks, as well as the number of vessels tied at port that correspond to the typical characteristics of these vessels.

It was observed that the majority of the vessels identified as driftnetters exceeded 10 metres in length, and that the volume of nets observed indicated that the power of the engines must exceed the 80 hp declared by Moroccan sources.

On the quayside, the volume of driftnets found was much higher than that of other fishing gear. The maximum estimated net length for one set of nets was 4 kilometres.

The fleet in the Alboran Sea

The Alboran Sea, the easternmost entrance point to the Straits of Gibraltar, is a unique location within the Mediterranean due to the biological richness and diversity provided by the convergence of waters from the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. The exploitation of resources is regulated by the demarcation of the 12 miles of territorial waters of Spain and Morocco respectively, together with the demarcation of the Spanish territorial waters of Alboran Island, located 45 miles from Cabo Tres Forcas (Morocco). Alboran Island is a marine reserve³² with a perimeter including the island's continental shelf, which is located both in territorial waters and on the high seas. However, the jurisdiction of these waters is not clear since Morocco has designated its Exclusive Economic Zone³³. This makes it difficult to determine the illegality of the driftnetters that carry out their activities in these waters, as well as the possibility of applying sanctions.



© OCEANA/Juan Cuetos. Alboran Island. August 2006.

The driftnetter *El Farsioui* was located during the early hours of 20 August. The vessel, measuring approximately 15 metres in length and with 8 crew members on board, had all the typical characteristics mentioned above. The total length of the net in the water was estimated at 11 kilometres (6 nm). Oceana observers were able to document the catch, determining both the swordfish catch as well as the catch of non-target species. Only 11% of the catch corresponded to the target species, and 168 ocean sunfish (*Mola mola*) made up the predominant bycatch, which was 78% of the total catch, subsequently discarded because of its low commercial value. Catches of bonito (*Sarda sarda*), pelagic stingrays (*Pteroplatytrygon spp*) and common dolphinfish (*Coryphaena hippurus*) were also documented at 6%, 5% and 0.5% of the total catch respectively.

The net length was calculated with the help of a plotter.

On 20 August, the driftnetter *Zidni* was documented in the same area, measuring approximately 14 metres in length and with an estimated 12 kilometres of nets on board. Its base port is Nador. As soon as the nets were hauled in the catch was hidden under a canvas, waiting for nightfall to set the nets once again.

There is evidence that these activities are common in this area. In 2005, the Spanish longline fleet discovered the presence of up to 18 Moroccan driftnetters fishing only 10 nm west of Alboran Island. Although the nets are usually set outside Spanish territorial waters, sometimes these can drift as close as 3 nm from the island.

The *Oceana Ranger* research vessel sailed around the Alboran Sea during August, documenting both the biological diversity of the area as well as the different fishing activities carried out there.

During night sailing, various driftnetters were identified fishing a few miles off the coast of Alboran Island. The *Oceana Ranger* was able to follow three of them, two of which were documented and filmed as they carried out their activities. The first vessel found could not be identified due to the darkness, but the length of its nets was estimated at 6.4 kilometres.



© OCEANA/Juan Cuetos. Moroccan driftnetter discarding an ocean sunfish (*Mola mola*). Alboran Sea, August 2006.

Oceana observers inspected the ports of Nador and Alhucemas by land, in order to evaluate the number of vessels dedicated to catching swordfish in this area.



© OCEANA/Juan Cuctos. The driftnetter *Zidni*. Alboran Sea, August 2006.

At Nador, the presence of 12 vessels clearly identified as driftnetters was documented, as well as large quantities of nets arranged in bundles on the docks or laid out on the esplanade. The length of some of these bundles was estimated at 3 kilometres, and the total length of the volume of nets found on the quayside was estimated at 25 kilometres.

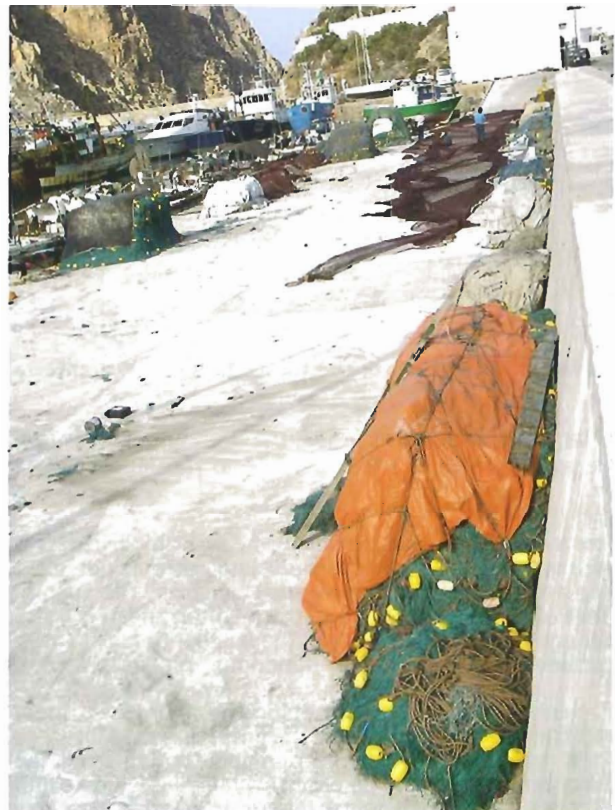
Only 4 driftnetters were identified at Alhucemas, probably due to the fact that the weather was favourable and many vessels were out at sea. As in other ports, various bundles of nets were seen on the quayside, the total length of which was estimated at 18 kilometres.

During the *Oceana Ranger*'s crossing of the Alboran Sea, various fishing areas where the Moroccan driftnetters carry out their activities were identified, located near groups of underwater peaks and at depths over 200 m. Among the areas identified were the banks of Xauen, Tofiño, Provençaux and Cabliers.

Furthermore, the presence of various species was also documented in these waters, such as common dolphins (*Delphinus delphis*), striped dolphins (*Stenella coeruleoalba*), long-finned pilot whales (*Globicephala melas*) and Risso's dolphins (*Grampus griseus*).



Driftnetters and driftnets on the docks at the port of Nador. August 2006.



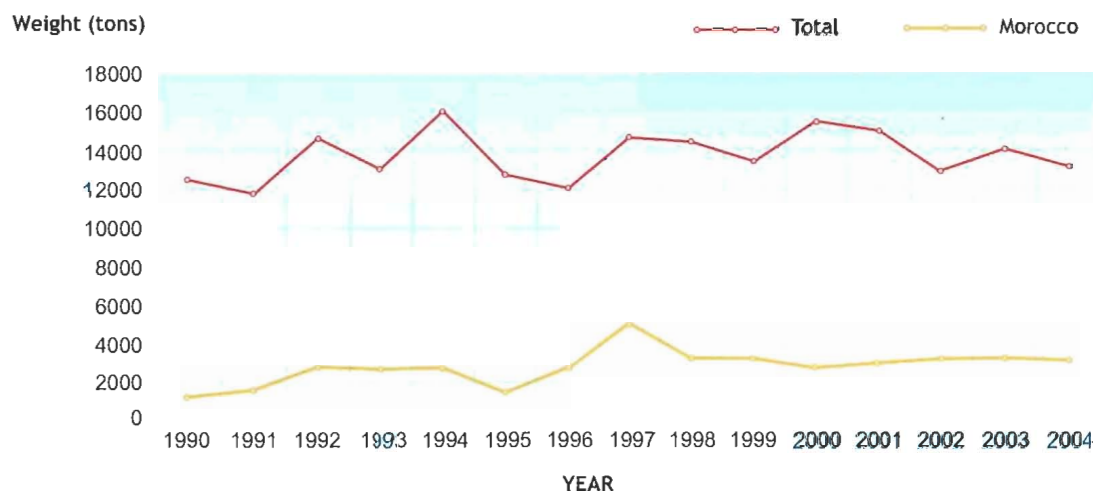
Driftnets at the port of Alhucemas. August 2006.

Swordfish catches

Morocco has the second largest catch of swordfish in the Mediterranean Sea, the majority of which is caught illegally with driftnets. According to sources, when trying to estimate the use of this fishing gear in the total national catch of swordfish there are the same wide discrepancies between the various sources as when trying to establish the size of the driftnet fleet. Between 1998-2002, it is estimated that 88% of total catches of swordfish in Morocco (> 2,000 t in 2001) was carried out using this fishing gear²³. In 2004, swordfish constituted 26.4% of Morocco's total catch in the Mediterranean region, 38% of which was with driftnets²⁰.

As can be seen in the graph, the catch increased in the early nineties, mainly due to the introduction of driftnets into the fishery¹⁷. This was largely facilitated by the introduction of restrictions and subsequent prohibition on the use of this fishing gear in Europe, leading to the decrease in the price of the nets.

Swordfish catches (*Xiphias gladius*) in the Mediterranean Sea



Source: ICCAT, 2005.

Between 50% and 70% of the total catch in the Mediterranean Sea is comprised of juveniles (less than three years old)³⁴.

As far as Morocco is concerned, the average size of swordfish caught depends on the fishing area. In the Straits of Gibraltar, the average size is 143 cm, while in the Alboran Sea it is 106 cm, and the smallest fish landed measured 65 cm³⁰.

The average number of swordfish caught by driftnets is estimated at 0.8 individuals per kilometre of net set³⁵. The average number of swordfish caught by the Spanish fleet of surface longliners in the Mediterranean is 8 fish per one thousand hooks³⁶, and the number of hooks varies between 1,000 and 2,000 depending on the season³⁷.

The increased use of driftnets in the swordfish fishery and the difficulties involved in converting the Moroccan fleet when faced with the demand coming from the European markets can be easily explained if we take into account that much more labour is needed to carry out longlining activities than driftnetting activities.



© OCEANA/Juan Cuetos. A swordfish is caught with a driftnet. Alboran Sea, August 2006.

Incidental catches

The international community has condemned driftnets because they are a threat to many species. In 1994, it was estimated that only 7% of the total Spanish catch using driftnets was made up of the target species (swordfish). The remaining 93% consisted of accidental bycatch, which included cetaceans, sea turtles and elasmobranchs. That same year, 289 common dolphins (*Delphinus delphis*) and striped dolphins (*Stenella coeruleoalba*) were caught in driftnets, as well as 0.32 loggerhead turtles (*Caretta caretta*) per kilometre of net set³⁸.

In 1994, it was estimated that driftnets operating in the Mediterranean captured more than 10,000 cetaceans annually¹¹.

Regarding the Moroccan fleet, the most common accidental bycatch are three species of sharks: the thintail thresher shark (*Alopias vulpinus*), the shortfin mako shark (*Isurus oxyrinchus*) and the blue shark (*Prionace glauca*), constituting 51% in weight of total accidental bycatch³⁹.

More recent studies have estimated that between 7,000 and 8,000 thintail thresher sharks, shortfin mako sharks and blue sharks are caught by the Moroccan driftnet fleet in the Alboran Sea, and between 24,000 and 27,000 are caught by the fleet operating in the Straits of Gibraltar. Similarly, it is estimated that 3,647 striped and common dolphins are caught annually by this fleet in the Alboran Sea and 13,358 in the Straits of Gibraltar. This bycatch constitutes 10.2% and 12.3% of the populations of striped and common dolphins respectively, in the Alboran Sea⁴⁰.

Accidental bycatch of large cetaceans by Moroccan driftnets has also been documented. Fin whales (*Balaenoptera physalus*), minke whales (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*) and long-finned pilot whales (*Globicephala melas*) get caught in these nets or are found dead on the beach with net marks on them¹⁹.

This pressure on cetaceans and elasmobranch populations is not sustainable. Concerning the common dolphin, included on the IUCN Red List as a threatened species, the Alboran Sea has been considered as "an important area for the conservation⁴¹" of this species. The elimination of driftnets is one of the principal management measures to be adopted to ensure biodiversity conservation.

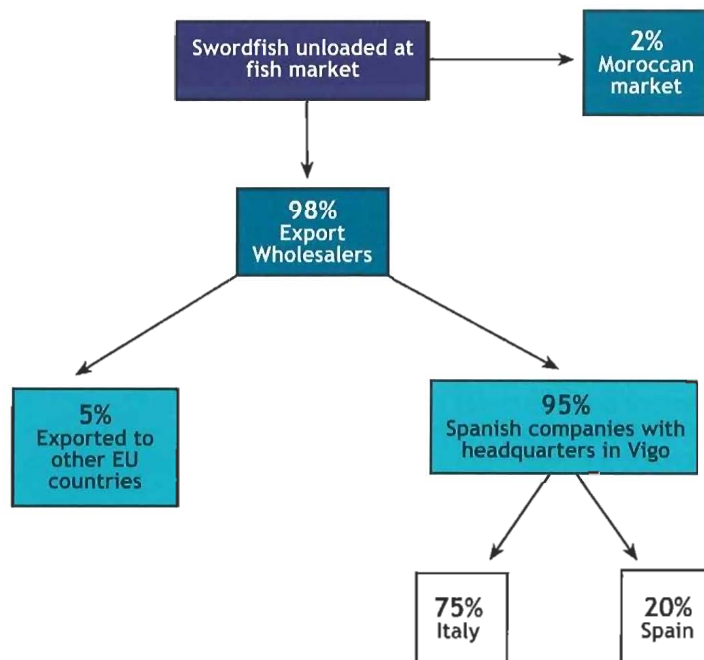


© OCEANA/Juan Cuetos. Long-finned pilot whales (*Globicephala melas*). Alboran Sea, August 2006.

Marketing routes: The role of the European Union in the driftnet fishery

According to a thesis presented at the University of Barcelona in 2006⁴², 95% of the Moroccan swordfish catch in the Mediterranean is marketed by Spanish companies based in Vigo, dedicated to the import and export of fishery products. In graph 2, a brief outline of the marketing routes is shown.

Marketing routes for swordfish caught in the Moroccan Mediterranean.



Source: M. M. Idrissi, 2006.

If we assume, from a conservative point of view, that in 2004, 38% of the Moroccan swordfish catch was a product of driftnetting activities, and taking into account that the total catch for that year was 3,253 tonnes, then it can be easily concluded that, in 2004, 1,150 tonnes of swordfish caught with driftnets banned by the European Union passed through the large Spanish distribution markets, or Mercas, to be subsequently exported to the Italian market.

That same year, 230 tonnes of illegally caught swordfish were marketed in Spain. Looking back on previous years, before the implementation of the plan to eliminate driftnets in Morocco, up to 1,733 tonnes of fish caught illegally by driftnets had been marketed annually by Spanish companies, and up to 348 tonnes were consumed in Spain. While these figures can construct an approximate calculation, the amounts of driftnets observed in Moroccan ports indicate that this fishing gear's contribution to the national production of swordfish is somewhat greater than 38%. As such, the quantities of swordfish traded in the UE most likely exceed those previously indicated.

It is necessary to emphasise the fact that part of the Spanish surface longline fleet, whose target species is also swordfish, shares the fishing grounds of the Alboran Sea with part of the Moroccan driftnet fleet. The decrease of the Spanish fishery following the ban on the use of driftnets, together with the introduction of swordfish from that same stock into the Spanish market from Morocco, constitutes unfair competition for that part of the Spanish fishing sector.

Furthermore, it is quite contradictory that the European Union, after banning the use of driftnets in its waters and by its vessels, should be the destination of practically all the swordfish caught illegally by the Moroccan fleet.

Conclusions

One year after the GFCM prohibited the use of driftnets of any length to catch large pelagic species in the Mediterranean, some countries in the region continue to use them.

Morocco, with a minimum of 150 vessels catching swordfish with driftnets, is significant in the Mediterranean, because the development in 2004 of an effective plan to convert the fleet may set a precedent for other countries such as Turkey or Algeria to definitively eliminate the use of this gear from their fleets.

Political and economic intervention by the United States and the European Union may very well be a determining factor, both in the economic aid necessary for the conversion and dismantling process, as well as in assistance provided for the necessary control measures. A high priority should be given to the effective traceability of fish products imported from Morocco into the European Union.

As part of its campaign for the elimination of driftnets in the Mediterranean, Oceana proposes a series of recommendations directed toward both the European Union and the Spanish and Italian governments, in order that the Moroccan government's conversion plan should conclude successfully.

- The Moroccan government has already breached various international agreements regarding driftnets. Once the conversion plan concludes, on January 1, 2009, the relevant measures should be applied in the case that this fleet continues to operate.
- 1.25 million Euros will be allotted annually for the elimination of this fishing gear from the Moroccan fleet. However, the buying and marketing within the European Union of swordfish caught illegally with driftnets constitutes not only a contradiction but also unfair competition for the EU's longlining fleet. For this reason, the importing of illegally caught swordfish should not be permitted once the prohibition of the use of driftnets in the Kingdom of Morocco becomes effective.
- Given Spain's role as leading importer / exporter of illegally caught swordfish and the fact that this swordfish comes from shared stocks, make it necessary to increase cooperation between Spain and Morocco for the elimination of this fishing gear and for the implementation of plans for effective traceability of the imported fish products, so that final consumers may distinguish the illegal origin of the product.

The conversion of driftnets in the European Union promoted the appearance of these nets in non-EU Mediterranean countries. Taking into account that the illegally caught swordfish is destined almost completely for European markets, the elimination of this fishing gear must be accompanied by the halting of imports of swordfish captured by driftnets. If not, any financial investment to phase out driftnets risks being undermined.

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