



OCEANA



OCEANS AT RISK:
Wasted Catch and the Destruction of Ocean Life

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Destructive fishing practices are destroying large portions of our oceans and the life within them. “Wasted Catch and the Destruction of Ocean Life” highlights one particularly devastating problem called bycatch, or wasted catch — the unintended catch and subsequent destruction of unwanted fish and other marine life as a byproduct of fishing practices.

Protecting the world’s oceans should start here in the United States, where fishing nets strangle, drown, and crush billions of fish, and thousands of sea turtles, whales, dolphins, sharks, and seabirds. Other gears, such as bottom trawls, bulldoze the ocean floor in search of fish, scraping up virtually everything in their path.

But the problem is not unique to the U.S. **Around the world each year an estimated 44 billion pounds of fish are wasted – 25 percent of the entire world catch. Tens of thousands of marine mammals, birds, corals, and other forms of ocean life are also caught and discarded. This massive destruction of sea life puts our oceans at risk, and with them our food supplies, our coastal economies, and even ourselves.**

Unfortunately, the U.S. government fails to carry out laws already on the books to help protect disappearing ocean wildlife and to reduce the numbers of marine animals caught unintentionally during fishing. In particular, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), the lead federal agency charged with monitoring and reducing bycatch, has failed to bring the nation’s fisheries into compliance with federal laws years after Congress passed the law requiring action, and three years after the agency issued a report highlighting the problem. As a result, **Oceana has filed a formal petition to force the agency to fulfill its duties under current U.S. laws that require it to halt waste and mismanagement of our oceans.**

This report by Oceana shows an in-depth analysis of NMFS’ most important study of this problem, “Managing the Nation’s Bycatch.” The study shows a huge gap between the size of the problem on the one hand, and the amount of information NMFS has gathered and the

actions it has taken, on the other. Although this 1998 report reveals only the tip of the iceberg, it makes clear the nation’s fisheries management plans are not adequate either to monitor the extent of wasted catch or to reduce it. Bycatch has devastated species and ecosystems all over the country – from groundfish in New England, to sea turtles and sawfish in the Gulf of Mexico, to seabirds and deepwater corals in Alaska.

NMFS has done almost nothing to force those responsible, primarily the regional fisheries management councils, to bring their plans into compliance. NMFS has repeatedly approved fishery management plans that fail to adequately address the bycatch problem, and has taken little action to improve the vast majority of out-of-compliance fisheries. When the agency does act, it usually does so only under court order. Similarly, the agency has been slow to enforce the necessary safeguards needed for species protected under the Endangered Species Act and Migratory Bird Treaty Act, such as sea turtles and albatrosses.

Congress has established goals for reducing bycatch of marine mammals to “levels approaching zero.” Wasted catch of other forms of marine life also puts our oceans and our circle of life at risk. The government must set similar aggressive bycatch reduction goals for all marine resources, including fish.

Oceana calls on NMFS and Congress to immediately implement the following five critical measures to end wasteful fishing practices, to protect ocean life and habitat.

COUNT: Require adequate numbers of observers on fishing vessels to obtain better data on bycatch.

CAP: Improve fisheries management plans by including mortality from bycatch in estimates of total mortality, and also require hard caps on total fish mortality and bycatch mortality for all fisheries.

CONTROL: Develop, approve and implement bycatch assessment and reduction plans before allowing fishing.

IMPROVE: Amend the Magnuson-Stevens Act to mirror the Marine Mammal Protection Act by establishing bycatch reduction goals to “levels approaching zero.”

REPORT: Issue Bycatch Control Reports detailing the status of bycatch in the nation’s fisheries on a regular basis.

This report by Oceana also contains regional information, including a map highlighting the effects of bycatch on particular species for different areas off the U.S. coasts. These data demonstrate how seriously bycatch threatens fish stocks and critical marine species.

This indiscriminate destruction of fish and marine wildlife throughout U.S. waters is not only devastating species, but is upsetting the natural balance of the ocean’s ecosystems, and causing changes to the web of ocean life that has evolved over the millennia. The removal of marine wildlife and the destruction of their habitat disrupts healthy marine communities in much the same way as clearcutting destroys forests and terrestrial wildlife.

The U.S. government must implement existing laws to reduce bycatch and require fishing methods that are more efficient and clean, stopping ocean waste and destruction. If we do not meet this goal, our oceans will continue to decline precipitously, putting everything that depends on the oceans, including ourselves, at risk.

Life began in the oceans. The oceans sustain life now. Healthy oceans are essential to our own health and well-being. This report is the first in a series documenting destructive fishing practices that not only deplete the ocean of fish, marine mammals, and other ocean life, but also destroy essential habitat and contribute to the overall decline of ocean ecosystems, putting the circle of life at risk.

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OCEANA is a new, non-profit, international advocacy organization dedicated to protecting and restoring the world’s oceans. We bring together dedicated people from around the world, building an international movement to save the oceans through public policy advocacy, science and economics, legal action, grassroots mobilization, and public education.