



MEDIA RELEASE

19 October 2020

UFAW FUNDS STUDY TO HELP EVALUATE MARINE WILDLIFE DEATHS IN CORNWALL

UFAW is pleased to announce that it has part-funded a study which aims to provide a greater understanding of the impact of “bycatch” on cetaceans (dolphins, porpoises and whales) in Cornwall and to prove the efficacy of the Bycatch Evidence Evaluation Protocol (BEEP) Project.

In the fishing industry, bycatch is a fish or other marine species that is caught unintentionally while catching certain target species and sizes of fish, crabs etc. Sadly, bycatch is a primary threat and cause of death for cetaceans, particularly common dolphin and harbour porpoise, in the southwest of the UK and Cornwall has been identified as a principal area of concern for incidental entanglement of cetaceans in fishing gear.

Bycatch and entanglement in fishing gear is a major animal welfare concern. Asphyxia (suffocation) has been found to be the lead cause of death for entangled cetaceans as animals have an automatic reflex to breath-hold underwater, and if trapped in nets will suffocate rather than inhale water and drown, causing extreme suffering. There is no direct evidence on how long these animals suffer before death but it could range between minutes to hours, especially if the animal is entangled in gear in a position where it is partially able to reach the surface to breathe, thereby prolonging its suffering. Marine mammals entangled in fishing gear are known to suffer significant physical injury, both externally and internally, during attempts to escape - severe bruising, deep skin cuts and slices, broken jaws, misaligned or broken teeth and internal haemorrhage are all common injuries associated with entanglement.

The project leader for the study is Niki Clear, Data Officer (GIS and Marine) for the Cornwall Wildlife Trust. Said Niki: *“Cornwall Wildlife Trust has been recording cetacean strandings and monitoring for bycatch for over 27 years through its citizen science project - the Marine Strandings Network (MSN). Through this network, we have designed a protocol for recording evidence of bycatch on dead stranded animals (BEEP – the Bycatch Evidence Evaluation Protocol). This protocol allows trained experts and volunteers to credibly diagnose bycatch from external injuries and evidence from the*

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animal on the beach, in the absence of a post-mortem examination. However, BEEP assessments are not currently recognised as a valid method of determining bycatch as a cause of death for stranded cetaceans by the scientific community or Government bodies. There is an urgent need to test the accuracy of BEEP assessments and publish our findings as proof of concept and, with the funding from UFAW, this is what we aim to achieve.”

The study will take three years and will build on the knowledge of previous trials to show how trained volunteers are able to accurately diagnose cause of death using the BEEP protocol. The accuracy of their findings will be compared against post-mortem examinations by veterinarians.

It is hoped that the BEEP protocol will enable the data and findings to influence government actions and bycatch mitigation for the southwest of England. In addition, the methods will also be made available for other stranding schemes which operate in other regions and countries, thus adding to the options available for monitoring bycatch levels and influencing improvement action.

UFAW’s support for this project with a grant is timely as the most recent statistics are cause for concern. In 2019, 247 cetaceans (dolphins, porpoises and whales) stranded around the Cornish coastline – the second highest figure in fifteen years.

Findings from the BEEP work, together with pathology reports from stranded animals that underwent post mortems, showed that accidental entanglement in fishing gear is not only a primary cause of death, but a serious threat to the cetacean population in the south west. Added Niki: *“Of all 247 cetaceans which stranded in 2019, 43% were assessed on the beach by BEEP which identified that nearly a third of the animals were defined as cause of death by bycatch; we must continue with this research and UFAW’s grant is crucial to us being able to do so.”*

UFAW’s CEO Huw Golledge said: *“I’m pleased that UFAW has been able to support this study to validate a promising way of simply quantifying bycatch of cetaceans. If successful, having reliable evidence about the prevalence of accidental entanglement of cetaceans will be the first step towards reducing this important animal welfare and conservation issue.”*

-ENDS-

Additional Information

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UFAW

The Universities Federation for Animal Welfare (UFAW) is an internationally recognised, independent scientific and educational animal welfare charity. It works to improve knowledge and understanding of animals' needs in order to achieve high standards of welfare for farm, companion, research, captive wild animals and those with which we interact in the wild.

UFAW improves animal welfare worldwide through its programme of awards, grants and scholarships; by educational initiatives, especially at university and college level; by providing information in books, videos, reports and in its scientific journal *Animal Welfare*; by providing expert advice to governments and others, including for legislation and 'best practice' guidelines and codes; and by working with animal keepers, scientists, vets, lawyers and all those who care about animals.

This work relies on the support of members, subscribers and donors. www.ufaw.org.uk

The Bycatch Project

The Bycatch Project will be asking volunteers from all backgrounds to take part, the project is creating a website where volunteers can complete specific training and examine real strandings cases using BEEP. If you are interested and want to take part you can sign up on the project website – www.BycatchProject.co.uk. Niki says "*We're so excited to be launching this project for volunteers and citizen scientists to take part in early 2021. Volunteers will be able to contribute to important scientific research from the comfort of their own home.*"

The Cornwall Wildlife Trust

Cornwall Wildlife Trust is one of 46 Wildlife Trusts working across the UK. With the invaluable support of our volunteers, members and corporate supporters we manage over 50 nature reserves, including an island for wildlife and people in Cornwall. We also work with other organisations and landowners to protect and connect wildlife sites across the county and inspire local communities and young people to care for wildlife where they live. www.cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk

The MSN Network

The Marine Strandings Network is a flagship project of Cornwall Wildlife Trust (CWT), recording and monitoring dead marine wildlife strandings in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly for almost 30 years. CWT works in partnership with the Cetacean Strandings Investigation Programme (DEFRA funded) and University of Exeter, working alongside strandings projects covering Wales and Scotland. It is a citizen science project with a

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network of over 190 specially trained volunteers. You can help by reporting any dead marine animal you find along our coastline when out and about. The CWT MSN has a dedicated Strandings Hotline telephone number (0345 201 2626), for the reporting of stranded marine animals. The Hotline number operates year-round and is staffed by a rota of dedicated volunteer Hotline Coordinators. So please, save it in your phone and be part of the Project.

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