

Time to Protect Ocean Wildlife and Phase Out Destructive Fishing Gear

By Brandon Cole

Basking sharks surrounded me as I swam off the coast of Santa Barbara, Calif. As a young college student in the late 1980s, the shadowy sight of the massive filter-feeders both startled and thrilled me: It was amazing to experience the incredible underwater world created by the California Current, one of the richest marine ecosystems on Earth.

Then, within a within a couple of years, the basking sharks had disappeared. What happened?

I can't say for certain, but I know it wasn't helped by the documented entanglement of these gentle giants in milelong drift gillnets targeting swordfish off the California coast. Basking sharks have notoriously low reproductive rates, meaning each animal killed in a drift gillnet represents an exponential blow to the population as a whole.

Today, I make my home in Spokane but I travel the world as a professional underwater photographer. In my travels, I've seen first-hand the destruction caused by indiscriminate fishing gear and I've become even more passionate about doing everything we can to protect ocean wildlife. It's bad enough to see dolphins killed in third-world countries where fishermen struggle to survive, but it's inexcusable that we continue to permit drift gillnets to catch swordfish along the West Coast of one of the richest, most sustainably minded country on Earth.

Residents of the Inland Northwest have a stake in this situation, too.

This week, the Pacific Fishery Management Council will meet right here in Spokane. During its meeting, the council will consider a variety of measures to refine the drift gillnet fishery for swordfish. I believe it's time to change the conversation, starting right here in Spokane: Rather than thinking of ways to keep drift gillnets in the water, fishery managers need to commit to a transition to less-wasteful methods of catching swordfish.

To their credit, Washington's own representatives to the council have been clear in expressing their desire to see a transition to less-wasteful methods of catching swordfish. In fact, Washington and Oregon stopped issuing state permits for drift gillnets targeting swordfish years ago out of concern about waste. Even though the remaining California-based fishery is relatively small – with only about 20 active boats – it kills more porpoises, dolphins and whales than all other fisheries on the West Coast and Alaska *combined*.

Unfortunately, the council appears content to allow drift gillnets to continue operating indefinitely. Even though this method of fishing has been "fine-tuned" several times since its inception off the West Coast in the late 1970s – including the creation of a seasonally closed area off Oregon and California to protect

migrating Pacific leatherback sea turtles – drift gillnets remain a fundamentally indiscriminate killer of marine life along our coast. It is time to phase out this gear in favor of selective methods of catching swordfish.