



Wildly Unforgiving

Dangers of Drift Gillnets off the California Coast

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The Problem:

Drift gillnets targeting swordfish off California entrap and kill ocean wildlife

Mile-long drift gillnets are set at night in ocean waters off California to target swordfish and thresher sharks, but they create deadly traps for iconic ocean wildlife. Roughly 60 different species of marine life including many types of whales, dolphins, seals, sea lions, sea turtles, sharks, tunas, marlins, and other fish drown or become critically injured in these nets. This fishery catches and throws back more marine life than it keeps, discarding approximately 64 percent of the catch on average. Approximately one quarter of the animals pulled from the nets are dead and the fate of surviving animals that are released is unknown. Drift gillnets also harm recreational fishing, depleting the ocean of fishing opportunities that support outdoor tourism and local jobs.

Over the past 10 years (2004-2014) the fishery discarded:

- 64% of all animals caught
- 464 Dolphins
- 41 Whales
- 380 Seals and sea lions
- More than 9,600 sharks

Data from the NOAA Observer Program

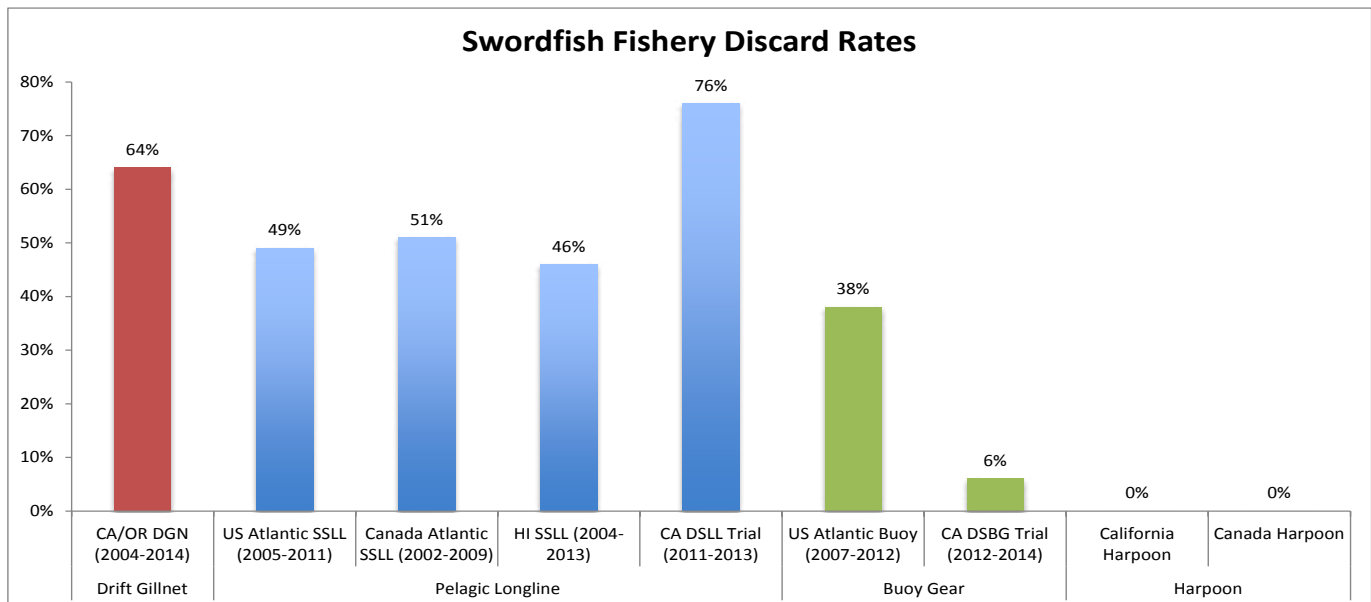
This drift gillnet fishery is the only fishery on the U.S. West Coast with Category I status under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, a federal designation reserved for fisheries that frequently entangle and kill marine mammals.

Management of this West Coast swordfish fishery is drastically falling behind the global curve of responsible fishery management. In July 2015, Russia became the next country in a long list of regions worldwide to prohibit the use of drift gillnets due to bycatch concerns.

Swordfish drift gillnets are banned in the Mediterranean Sea and on the high seas, have been phased out off the U.S. East Coast, and are not permitted by Oregon or Washington states.

In 1985 there were approximately 300 drift gillnet vessels. This number dwindled to fewer than 20 vessels actively fishing each year between 2012 and 2014.

A transition plan must be developed that ends the use of swordfish drift gillnets and promotes clean gear alternatives to ensure a vibrant, healthy, sustainable marine ecosystem and an ocean-based economy into the future.



This chart details discard rates (percentage of the total catch that is thrown overboard) using different gear types to target swordfish in North American oceans. SSL = shallow-set longline, DSLL = deep-set longline, DSBG = deep-set buoy gear

The Solution: Providing domestic swordfish products with alternative fishing gears that reduce bycatch

The vision for a successful swordfish fishery transition plan includes a combination of the below components.

- Hard caps provide an interim measure to limit bycatch for whales, dolphins, pinnipeds, sea turtles and fish species; triggering the fishery to shut down for the remainder of the season when any one of these bycatch caps are reached.
- Further experiments improve viability of low bycatch fishing methods.
- Modified permits allow fishermen currently holding drift gillnet permits options that incentivize conversion to cleaner gear types, including buoy gear.
- A transition fund assists with gear conversion costs.
- A sunset date establishes a date certain after which drift gillnet use is prohibited and gear must be replaced with cleaner substitutes.
- Import restrictions on foreign swordfish products that do not meet U.S. bycatch standards levels the playing field for U.S. fishermen.

Deep-set buoy gear and harpoons are gear types that catch swordfish with far less bycatch than drift gillnets or longlines. Experiments with deep-set buoy gear indicate economic profitability, active gear tending which allows quick release and minimal mortality to untargeted animals, high selectivity at targeting swordfish based on daytime sets at swordfish feeding depths, and potential to scale up swordfish catches with low bycatch. Harpoons can be used in addition to deep-set buoy gear.

Additionally, harpoons are a currently legal and historically proven gear type that target swordfish in a more sustainable manner where products also earn substantially higher prices in the marketplace relative to drift gillnet-caught swordfish.

Reintroduction of pelagic longlines is not an acceptable component of a transition plan. This fishing method has been prohibited off the U.S. West Coast for decades due to extremely high bycatch.

Now is the time to switch to alternative gear types that catch swordfish in a way that is safer for marine life.

[Learn more](http://www.oceana.org/stopthenets) at www.oceana.org/stopthenets



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