

# MARINE MAMMALS



ANIMAL WELFARE INSTITUTE

An underwater photograph of a manatee swimming towards the camera. The manatee's head and trunk are in the foreground, and its body extends into the background. The water is clear and blue, with sunlight filtering through from above, creating a shimmering effect on the surface.

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*Dangers Facing Marine Mammals in the Wild*

## MARINE MAMMALS AND US LAW

In 1972, the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) was passed by the US Congress to protect the many mammals that live in the world's oceans. This legislation forms the basis for policies preventing the harassment, capture, injury, or killing of all species of whales, dolphins, porpoises, seals, and sea lions, as well as walruses, manatees, dugongs, sea otters, and polar bears. Several international commissions and treaties—including the International Whaling Commission (IWC) and the International Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears—also exist to conserve and manage marine mammal populations.

In spite of these important laws, agreements, and intergovernmental bodies, hundreds of thousands of marine

mammals remain at serious risk from human activities, including those related to interactions with fisheries, climate change, pollution and other habitat degradation, hunting, and capture for marine theme parks. Attempts to protect marine mammals from the hazards of human activities are hindered by ineffective enforcement of laws, many countries' failure to set effective standards, and the vastness of the area to be policed. Marine mammals face eight major dangers in the wild, as described below.

## 1. FISHERIES

The US government estimates that as many as 100,000 marine mammals are killed or injured by the US commercial fishing industry every year. The global estimate is 650,000 marine mammals. These animals are most often killed or injured as “bycatch.” They are not targeted but rather become incidentally entangled in fishing gear such as gillnets, longlines, and drift nets—both active and discarded. Entanglement in fishing gear can result in a prolonged, agonizing death for some. It is the primary cause of death for the endangered North Atlantic right whale, which numbers fewer than 420 individuals. These slow swimming whales can become wrapped in fishing lines, nets, or traps, and drag this gear for months or even years, as it digs deeper into their skin and blubber. The wounds can fester and the whale can become increasingly exhausted; eventually, the emaciated animal may die after immense suffering. Chronic entanglement has also suppressed reproductive rates in right whales, 85 percent of whom bear scars from fishing gear interactions.

Fisheries can also reduce prey species that marine mammals depend on for food. Many global fish and invertebrate populations are in steep decline because of overfishing, which threatens the continued survival of targeted species and wreaks havoc on entire ecosystems. Overfishing presents a real danger to marine mammal survival, especially when the animals are beset by other cumulative threats.

## 2. HUNTING

Many cultures still hunt marine mammals, both for subsistence and for commercial profit. Modern commercial hunting of dolphins, seals, and whales, as well as sport hunting of polar bears, may not be sustainable and is not justified economically or culturally. All marine mammal “products” have modern substitutes that do not justify such cruel and wasteful hunts.

Unfortunately, few international regulations exist to control these hunts. Many abuses occur because it is difficult to monitor hunts in remote areas, and to police the high seas. Around the world, hundreds of thousands of seals of various species may be shot or clubbed to death in a single season—for fur, meat, oil, and body parts believed to have medicinal properties.

There is currently a moratorium on commercial whaling, adopted in 1982 by the IWC and implemented in 1986. However, Norway and Iceland continue to kill whales for commercial purposes, under objections to the ban. Japan kills whales purportedly for scientific research, but this is thinly disguised commercial whaling, as the meat and blubber from these “research” hunts are sold commercially.

Domestically, Norway, Iceland, and even Japan face a dwindling demand for whale meat, yet the former two still look to Japan for a market. Norway and Iceland routinely export whale meat products to Japan in defiance of a prohibition on international trade for commercial purposes established by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Whaling interests in all three countries are pressuring the IWC to overturn the commercial whaling ban and pushing CITES to end the trade prohibitions.

Worldwide, approximately 100,000 small whales, dolphins, and porpoises are intentionally killed each year for meat and, increasingly, for use as bait in fisheries. In Peru, for example, up to 15,000 dolphins are killed annually to be used as shark bait. In Japan, captured dolphins are sold to dolphinariums domestically and abroad. The rest are butchered for sale as meat (though they are often contaminated with pollutants such as mercury) or for use in pet food and fertilizer.



JONNY ZWICK PHOTOGRAPHY

A fin whale is butchered at the whaling station in Hvalfjörður, Iceland. Despite an IWC ban, Iceland continues to engage in commercial whaling.

Aboriginal subsistence hunting, especially if strictly regulated and conducted in a traditional manner, can usually continue as it has for generations without causing a decline of the target marine mammal populations. However, there is growing pressure to increase subsistence quotas, and, in some instances, products from these hunts are sold for commercial gain rather than to meet subsistence needs.

### 3. SHIP STRIKES

Transoceanic shipping has become easier and more widespread in the past half-century. The ever-increasing number, size, and speed of vessels plying the world's oceans are directly correlated with an increase in ship strikes of marine mammals. Ship strikes are another threat to the survival of the North Atlantic right whale. Actions are being taken to reduce this threat, though the species' ultimate survival remains uncertain. Fin and sei whales have been found draped across the bows of massive container ships following ocean crossings, the collisions going unnoticed by the crews. Small cetaceans can usually evade slower vessels, but they can fall victim to the expanding global fleet of high-speed ferries and even whale-watching boats.

Manatees in Florida face the threat of growing numbers of speedboats operating in coastal waterways, prime manatee habitat. These vessels often strike these slow-moving, surface-dwelling animals, seriously injuring or killing them. Many dolphins and whales worldwide have scars, ranging from minor to severe, from propeller strikes.

## 4. POLLUTION AND OTHER HABITAT DEGRADATION

Marine pollution is an increasing problem for marine mammals. Plastic debris, which breaks down into microplastics, enters the food chain when invertebrates and small fish mistake them for food, posing a growing threat to the marine mammals that consume them. Larger plastics, including discarded fishing gear, can encircle the snouts and necks of seals and sea lions, inhibiting breathing and feeding. Razor-thin nylon fishing lines slice into flukes and fins of entangled whales and dolphins, and increasing numbers of whales and dolphins are being found stranded and dead with digestive tracts full of plastic bags and other marine debris.

Oil spills, such as the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* spill in Prince William Sound, Alaska, and the 2010 Deepwater Horizon spill in the Gulf of Mexico, may kill and injure hundreds or even thousands of marine mammals and birds (not to mention fish and invertebrates vital to the food chain). Impacts include the oiling of fur and feathers, which destroys their insulating properties; injury to internal organs through ingesting oil, including from cleaning it off fur or feathers; and pneumonia from inhaling oil, especially in the case of whales and dolphins, who come up for air through the oil slicks at the surface of the water. The chemicals used to disperse oil slicks may themselves be toxic to marine life. Finally, a frequently overlooked threat to marine mammal populations is habitat destruction from oil spills.

Marine mammals are threatened by chemical pollution (such as heavy metals and organic pollutants), and the

destruction of coastal habitats by agricultural runoff and other forms of environmental degradation. The large-scale die-off of bottlenose dolphins along the mid-Atlantic coast of the United States in the 1980s and the 2010s may have been the result of increasing levels of toxic waste from industrial sources in these waters. Such pollutants can depress the immune system of marine mammals, making them more susceptible to disease and reducing reproductive success.

## 5. NOISE POLLUTION

Most marine mammals are highly dependent on hearing to survive. Toothed whales and dolphins, in particular, rely on echolocation, a form of sonar, to sense their surroundings. Human activities that may damage hearing and disrupt the social lives and foraging habits of marine mammals, as well as cause long-term, stress-related harm, include seismic air-gun use for oil and gas exploration; construction or dismantling of oil rigs, bridges, and other structures; active sonar and explosives use by the military; use of noisemakers (acoustic deterrent or harassment devices) to keep marine mammals away from fishing nets and fish pens; marine experiments that involve the use of loud sounds; and even the increasing level of engine noise from everyday boat and ship traffic, including whale-watching vessels.

Some adverse noise-related effects on marine life may occur at the population level. While such effects are not yet fully understood, they are known to include mass strandings of marine mammals, and reduced catch rates of prey species. Increasing international attention has been paid to marine noise in the past several years, with major intergovernmental bodies—including the European Parliament, the United Nations General Assembly, the International Union for Conservation of Nature, and the IWC—recognizing the threat posed by ocean noise and issuing calls to action and recommendations to help protect marine life from its harmful effects.

## 6. CLIMATE CHANGE

The world's climate is rapidly changing and human actions are the cause. These changes are being seen most dramatically at the poles, where ice is receding at an alarming rate. As the planet heats and the ice caps melt, human and animal habitats and lives change forever. Polar bears are predicted to be one of the first casualties, followed by whales, walrus, and other marine animals as seas heat, currents and weather patterns shift, migration routes change, and prey species move or die. New "northern passage" shipping lanes will open up, exposing marine mammals previously protected by ice to the threat of ship strikes and vessel noise. The effects of climate change are potentially irreversible, but they can be slowed and even halted through our choices.

## 7. CAPTURE FOR DISPLAY

The display of whales and dolphins in marine theme parks and aquariums (collectively, "oceanariums") is waning in North



USFWS ALASKA

Walrus cows rest and nurse their calves south of Nunivak Island, Alaska. Sea ice is vital to walrus and other marine mammals. Throughout the Arctic, ice cover is shrinking rapidly.



America and Europe, but is still prevalent in other parts of the world, particularly in Asia and Russia. Although seals and sea lions may breed readily in captivity, only a few species are held in numbers large enough to sustain a breeding population. Whales and dolphins, on the other hand, do not breed well in captivity. Some species have never produced surviving offspring, while the calves of others suffer high mortality rates. Therefore, many marine mammals on public display still come from the wild.

It is legal in most countries, including the United States under the MMPA, to capture wild marine mammals for display. Domestic laws usually justify this exploitative practice by contending that marine mammal display serves educational and conservation goals. However, studies are showing that public display does not effectively educate the public and it is becoming increasingly clear that profit is the main motive for conducting these captures.

The capture process itself violently disrupts social groups, splits up families, and snatches individuals from the water; it is a completely unnatural and traumatic event. Animals may die during capture attempts, drowning in the chaos as animals are chased and corralled. Those who undertake or authorize these captures rarely conduct the necessary assessments to determine a sustainable removal level, leading to local population declines. And the act of capturing betrays the trust of dolphins in particular, who often come to play at the bow of the capture boat, only to be netted and hauled aboard, a tragic ending to an innocent and joyful behavior.

## **8. FEEDING IN THE WILD**

Oceanariums foster the image of marine mammals as friendly, congenial human companions. This simplistic view ignores their complex lives as integral parts of the marine ecosystem. It also encourages people to approach these animals—from sea lions on a pier to dolphins at sea—and attempt to feed them. The growing trend of taking “selfies” with wildlife also contributes to people trying to feed these animals. Feeding



The remains of a dolphin ensnared by a fishing net, washed ashore in Portugal. Each year, hundreds of thousands of marine mammals die as a result of becoming entangled in fishing gear and nets.

marine mammals in the wild is strictly prohibited under the MMPA, but some people think it is harmless, and some even promote feeding marine mammals as a commercial venture.

Feeding wild marine mammals is harassment. It disrupts their behavior patterns; interferes with their normal foraging activities; decreases the natural, healthy caution they feel around humans; encourages them to approach boats and beg, which can lead to collisions and propeller injuries; and exposes them to being fed inappropriate or dangerous items, from poor-quality bait fish to firecrackers.

## YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

It will take dedicated public effort to protect marine mammals and their habitat from the many threats they face. Stronger laws, more effective enforcement of existing laws, and international agreements that specifically include safeguards for marine mammals are all necessary to ensure that this magnificent and diverse group of animals will continue to thrive in the world's vast oceans.

But you too can make a difference:

- If you eat seafood, consider the sustainability and humaneness of the fishery and purchase products only from companies that have publicly stated policies protecting marine mammals; this encourages them to keep their products and practices marine mammal–safe. Avoid products from countries that kill marine mammals for commercial profit. If in doubt, don't buy.
- Avoid the use of plastic products as much as you can. Be careful when you discard all plastic trash; for instance, clip the rings of six-pack holders; recycle plastic and other products.
- Write to oceanariums; insist that they oppose the capture of marine mammals from the wild for display and commercial exploitation and that they present accurate information on the natural history and behavior of these species so that people can make an educated, balanced comparison between the lives of wild and captive marine mammals.
- Keep up-to-date with what is happening in state and federal legislatures concerning the welfare and protection of marine mammals. When legislation that affects marine mammals is pending, write, call, or visit your legislators to express your concerns.
- Support local legislation that protects coastal habitats (e.g., by limiting coastal development and establishing marine protected areas), regulates disruptive human activities (e.g., by setting speed limits for ships and boats in marine mammal habitat and prohibiting or reducing anthropogenic noise sources), and prohibits the keeping of marine mammals in captivity or the removal of live marine mammals from state or local waters for display.



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