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Draft Best Handling Practices for the Safe Handling and Release of Cetaceans

WCPFC-SC17-2021/EB-WP-02 ([Rev.01](#))

United States of America

If you have any further comments, please send your comments in track-change to Emily Crigler (emily.crigler@noaa.gov) **by 5pm on Tuesday, 17 August 2021** Pohnpei time so that SC17 can endorse the Guidelines on Wednesday.

Draft Best Handling Practices for the Safe Handling and Release of Cetaceans

Draft Guidelines Prepared by the United States for Consideration by the Seventeenth Regular Session of the Scientific Committee

As noted in paragraph 520 of the WCPFC16 Summary Report, “*The Commission tasked the Scientific Committee in 2020 (SC16) to develop and recommend best handling practices for the release of cetaceans, taking into account existing standards or guidelines adopted in other fora, for consideration at WCPFC17.*”

To help inform this task, the United States has informally agreed to begin the development of draft best handling practices for the safe handling and release of cetaceans, for discussion at SC17.

BEST PRACTICES FOR THE SAFE HANDLING AND RELEASE OF CETACEANS

The following are guidelines for best handling practices of marine mammals, specifically cetaceans, for purse seine and longline vessels fishing for tuna and tuna-like species in the western and central Pacific Ocean:

GENERAL PROVISIONS:

Safety First: These guidelines should be considered in light of safety and practicability for crew. Crew safety should always come first. Cetaceans can be very powerful and hooked or entangled cetaceans can be unpredictable, therefore it is not safe to enter the water in order to release an animal.

Suggested Equipment: Vessels should have equipment on board to facilitate the release of cetaceans. For purse seine vessels, suggested equipment includes: canvas or net slings or stretchers for carrying or lifting, large mesh net or grid to cover hatches/hoppers, and tools for cutting/removing net. For longline vessels, suggested equipment includes long handled cutters and de-hookers. [Long handled cutters should have a blunt outer edge and curved blade with the sharp end on the inside to avoid damaging the animal.](#)

Training: Crew should be provided with training on best practices for the safe handling and release of cetaceans, including the use of appropriate equipment carried on board for such purposes.

Interactions/Notifications: Once a cetacean is observed inside a purse seine net or hooked or entangled on longline gear, immediately notify the captain or fishing master and ensure the crew knows what to do.

General Guidelines: For all gear types, keep animals in the water whenever possible. Removing a cetacean from the water is extremely stressful for the animal and can cause injury, so they should be released while in the water, wherever possible. However, cetaceans can be very powerful and hooked or entangled cetaceans can be unpredictable, therefore it is not safe to enter the water in order to release an animal. If it is necessary to land small cetaceans on deck in purse seine fisheries, always minimize time on deck and release cetaceans back to the water as soon as possible. When handling cetaceans, it is always best to handle with two or more people.

~~ANNEX I: GUIDELINES FOR THE SAFE HANDLING AND RELEASE OF CETACEANS IN PURSE SEINE GEAR~~

~~ANNEX II: GUIDELINES FOR THE SAFE HANDLING AND RELEASE OF CETACEANS IN LONGLINE GEAR~~

**ANNEX I: GUIDELINES FOR THE SAFE HANDLING AND RELEASE OF CETACEANS
PURSE SEINE GEAR:**

FOR LARGE CETACEANS (baleen whales and sperm whales) :

1. Large cetaceans should remain in the water
2. Do not attempt to release large cetaceans by having crew in the water
3. Release the animal as quickly as possible, without jeopardizing the safety of the crew

FOR SMALL CETACEANS (all toothed whales other than sperm whales):

Do's:

If in purse seine net:

1. Facilitate release of cetaceans while they are still free-swimming using whatever means that are safe and practical (e.g. back down procedure¹, 'dolphin gate'², cutting net, etc.)

If in brail or on deck:

1. Cetaceans that cannot be released in the water without compromising the safety of the crew or the cetacean itself should be returned to the water as soon as possible, either utilizing a ramp from the deck connecting to an opening on the side of the vessel, or through escape hatches. If ramps or escape hatches are not available, cetaceans should be lowered with a sling or cargo net, using a crane or similar equipment, if available.
2. If entangled in netting, carefully cut the net away from the animal and release it to sea as quickly as possible with minimal or no netting attached to the animal.
3. If on deck, keep the animal in an upright position, with dorsal side up.
4. Be cautious of the tail, which is powerful and can cause injury. Lift from the mid-section of the cetacean when possible, and never from the tail.
5. Cease hauling until cetacean is released, release cetacean as soon as possible.
6. Release cetaceans away from fishing operations, when main engines are in neutral to minimize the risk of further entanglement. Maintain observation of released animals until they have disappeared from sight or are sufficiently distant from the vessel to ensure no further interaction before resuming fishing operations.

Don'ts:

1. Do not handle the animal in any way that could cause harm, including
 - a. Do not cut or punch holes through the animal's body
 - b. Do not use gaffs or sharp objects to grab, move, or hold the animal

¹ Backdown Procedure: The vessel goes astern, so the corkline becomes elliptical and the most forward end is pulled below the surface, thus facilitating escape.

² Dolphin gate: A prefabricated quick release rope detaches the corkline from the seine net, which sinks and creates an opening for escape.

- c. Do not leave the animal exposed to sunlight for extended periods on deck
- d. Cetaceans breathe through their blowhole. Do not drag or pull the cetacean underwater in a manner that prevents it from surfacing to breathe. Do not cover or block the blowhole, or spray water in or near it, or allow water or other material to flow into the blowhole.
- e. Do not push, pull, bend, or lift by tail, flippers, fins, flukes or beaks
- f. Do not rest the cetacean on sharp or rough surfaces.

ANNEX II: GUIDELINES FOR THE SAFE HANDLING AND RELEASE OF CETACEANS IN LONGLINE GEAR:

FOR LARGE CETACEANS (baleen whales and sperm whales) :

4. Large cetaceans should remain in the water
5. Do not attempt to release large cetaceans by having crew in the water
6. Maneuver vessel to minimize tension on the fishing gear
7. Release the animal as quickly as possible, without jeopardizing the safety of the crew

FOR SMALL CETACEANS (all toothed whales other than sperm whales):

Do's:

1. Determine if the animal is hooked or entangled and prepare to remove the line.
 - a. If entangled: Maneuver the vessel in a way that will reduce tension on the line and then use a long-handled line cutter to cut as much line off of or as close to the animal as you can.
 - b. If hooked:
 - i. Determine whether the hook is ingested or not. If the hook appears to be ingested, maneuver vessel in a way that will reduce tension on the line and then use a long-handled line cutter to cut the line as close to the hook as possible, removing as much gear as possible
 - ii. If the hook is not ingested:
 1. If using “weak³” circle hooks:
 - a. maintain tension on the line, giving the hook a chance to straighten and release the animal without the hook or trailing line attached.
 - b. If the hook does not straighten, use a de-hooker to remove the hook and trailing line.
 - c. If the hook is not straightened or removed, use a long-handled line cutter to cut the line as close as you can to the hook, removing as much gear as possible.
 2. If not using weak circle hooks: Avoid pulling sharply on the branchline. Maneuver vessel in a way that will reduce tension on the line and then use a long-handled line cutter to cut the line as close to the hook as possible, removing as much gear as possible.

Don'ts:

1. Do not handle the animal in any way that could cause harm
 - a. Do not use gaffs or sharp objects to grab, move, or hold an animal
 - b. Do not cover or block the blowhole, or spray water in or near it, to allow uninterrupted breathing
 - c. Do not push, pull or lift by tail, flippers, fins, flukes or beaks
 - d. Do not drag or pull the cetacean underwater in a manner that prevents it from surfacing to breathe.

³ Circle hooks with a wire diameter of 4.5 mm or less with an offset not to exceed 10 degrees

References:

[Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Good Practice Guide for the Handling of Cetaceans Caught Incidentally in Mediterranean Fisheries.](#)

[Hamer, D. and Minton, G. \(2020\). Guidelines for the safe and humane handling and release of bycaught small cetaceans from fishing gear. UNEP/CMS Secretariat. Bonn, Germany 50 pages. CMS Technical Series No. 43.](#)

National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). Marine Mammal Handling and Release Guidelines. NMFS Pacific Islands Regional Office.

[NMFS. Protected Species Workshop Handling, Release, and Identification Guidelines. NMFS Pacific Islands Regional Office.](#)

[NMFS. Marine mammal handling/release guidelines: A quick reference for Atlantic pelagic longline gear. NMFS/ARFO Marine Mammal Handling Guidelines. NMFS Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office.](#)