IOTC-2026-SC29-13

Cetaceans and IOTC fisheries

Tim Collins[1,2], Umair Shahid[2], Rebecca Austin[2]

[1] Wildlife Conservation Society, Bronx, New York, USA.
[2]International Whaling Commission (IWC), Cambridge, United Kingdom

Purpose, expectation and action intended *(select one or more and include corresponding text)*

☒ **Discussions** *(for information and open discussion)*

The paper is to inform the SC that the 2025 deadlines in paragraphs 7 and 12 of Resolution 23/06 have passed, that reporting of cetacean interactions remains very limited, particularly from gillnet fisheries, and that the gillnet setting-depth provision of Resolution 21/01 is not carried into Resolution 26/01, as set out in the sections on IOTC Commitments, Cetacean catches, and Mitigation options.

☐ **Feedback** *(to collect input and suggestions)*

☐ **Conclusion** *(to record a concluded position or summary)*

☒ **Recommendation** *(to ask the meeting to endorse a recommendation)*

The paper is to seek endorsement of the recommendations on cetacean handling and release guidance, reporting, data collection and mitigation advice, as set out under Suggested actions for SC29.

☐ **Decisions** *(to request formal approval of actions)*

Abstract

Reporting of cetacean interactions in IOTC fisheries remains very limited. All cetacean records held in the IOTC databases come from longline observer programmes, with none reported from gillnet fisheries, which take about a third of the Indian Ocean tuna catch and are considered the main source of cetacean mortality. Progress on mitigation has also been limited. This paper reviews IOTC commitments on cetacean reporting and mitigation under Resolutions 23/06, 21/01 and 26/01 and the IOTC–IWC cooperation arrangement, identifies those which remain outstanding, and proposes actions the SC could take at SC29.

In this document 'the Commission', 'the Scientific Committee (SC)' and 'the Secretariat' are those of the IOTC unless stated otherwise.

Background

Reporting of cetacean interactions in IOTC fisheries remains limited. Recent reviews indicate that all cetacean records in the IOTC databases came from longline observer programmes and none had been reported from gillnet fisheries. Gillnet fisheries take about a third of the Indian Ocean tuna catch and are considered the main source of cetacean mortality (Anderson et al. 2020, Elliott et al. 2024). The IOTC's own advice describes reported mortalities as "most likely severely underestimated" and identifies the need for better data as a priority (Executive Summary for cetaceans 2026, IOTC-2026-WPEB22(AS)-R, Appendix XVIII).

Progress on mitigation has also been limited. Resolution 23/06 asked the SC to advise by 2025 on appropriate measures to mitigate interactions with cetaceans. The SC's advice to date encourages Contracting Parties and Cooperating Non-Contracting Parties (CPCs) to investigate means to reduce cetacean bycatch and does not identify specific measures. Resolution 26/01, adopted in May 2026 and pending entry into force, will supersede Resolution 21/01 and does not carry forward its requirement that gillnets be set 2 m below the surface, although evidence suggests that setting gillnets below the surface lowers the probability of cetacean bycatch (Kiszka et al. 2021).

This document reviews IOTC commitments on reporting and mitigation, identifies those that remain unmet, and proposes actions the SC could take at SC29.

IOTC Commitments

- Resolution 13/04 (2013) prohibited intentional purse seine sets on cetaceans and required safe release and reporting of interactions. Resolution 23/06 replaced it in 2023. Cetaceans encircled by purse seines or entangled in gillnets must be reported to the flag State (paragraph 3), as must all interactions with other gears (paragraph 4). CPCs must provide these data to the IOTC Secretariat by 30 June of the following year (paragraph 9). CPCs must also report cetaceans encircled by purse seines or entangled in gillnets or Fish Aggregating Devices under Article X of the IOTC Agreement (paragraph 10). The Resolution does not apply to artisanal fisheries operating exclusively within their own EEZ (paragraph 1), although paragraph 5 asks CPCs to encourage release and reporting in those fisheries.
- Resolution 23/06 also asked the SC to develop best practice guidelines for safe handling and release, for endorsement by the Commission by 2025 at the latest (paragraph 7). It asked the SC to review information on the status of cetaceans and advise the Commission on measures to mitigate interactions no later than 2025 (paragraph 12).
- Resolution 21/01 (paragraph 22) states that "CPCs shall set their gillnets at 2m depth from the surface in gillnet fisheries by 2023 to mitigate ecological impacts of gillnets". CPCs must report implementation through the IOTC Compliance Committee (paragraph 24). Resolution 19/01 (paragraph 21) contains the same provision and remains binding on the Islamic Republic of Iran, Madagascar, Oman and Somalia. Resolution 26/01, adopted in May 2026 and pending entry into force, will supersede Resolution 21/01 and contains no provisions on gillnets.

- The IOTC and the International Whaling Commission (IWC) agreed a Letter of Intent in 2022 and a Cooperation Agreement in 2023, to strengthen the monitoring and assessment of cetacean bycatch and to improve the cetacean data available to the IOTC Secretariat.

The 2025 dates in paragraphs 7 and 12 have passed. The IWC provided guidelines for the safe handling and release of small cetaceans in 2024 (IWC 2024), and SC27 recommended that the Commission consider them when developing conservation measures for cetaceans (SC27 report, paragraph 141). In 2026 the Commission requested an updated recommendation for endorsement in 2027 (S30 report, paragraph 48). WPEB22 has since recommended that the SC endorse a compiled best practice handling and release document (WPEB22(AS).09), as guidance and not as a mandatory standard. Its cetacean section currently covers dolphins and porpoises. The SC's advice under paragraph 12 does not yet identify specific mitigation measures. SC28 recommended that the Commission consider how to support an experimental gillnet trial on setting depth and soak time, including effects on cetaceans (SC28.12), and the Commission encouraged interested CPCs to develop a draft scoping paper (S30 report, paragraphs 44 and 45).

Cetacean catches

Elliott et al. (2024) found that "no bycatch records for any species in gillnets have been reported to the IOTC". The Regional Observer Scheme database, which covers 2005 to 2022, held 79 cetacean records, all from longliners and 85% from one fleet. The IOTC Secretariat's 2024 data review describes reporting of cetacean interactions as "extremely limited to date" (IOTC-2024-WPEB20(AS)-07). A review presented to WPEB13 in 2017 had already concluded that cetacean bycatch in the western Indian Ocean was very poorly documented and that gillnets were of greatest concern (Kiszka et al. 2017).

The WPEB provides the SC with an Executive Summary for cetaceans, which lists the IUCN Red List status of each species in the IOTC area and sets out management advice. The 2026 version advises that the number of fisheries interactions involving cetaceans "is highly uncertain and should be addressed as a matter of priority as it is a prerequisite for the WPEB to determine a status for any Indian Ocean cetacean species". Paragraph 12 of Resolution 23/06 asks the SC to review that status.

Anderson et al. (2020) estimated that Indian Ocean tuna gillnets caught almost 100,000 cetaceans a year at the 2004 to 2006 peak, and 4.1 million small cetaceans between 1950 and 2018. They suggested that such mortality is not sustainable and that small cetacean abundance may now be about 13% of pre-fishery levels. They noted that none of these estimates are precise, but that they demonstrate the likely order of magnitude. An ecological risk assessment presented to WPEB19 found that risk is higher, and for more species, in drift gillnets than in longlines or purse seines (Kiszka et al. 2023). The 2026 Executive Summary advises that maintaining or increasing fishing effort without mitigation "will likely result in further declines in a number of cetacean species", and notes that increasing effort by tuna drift gillnet fisheries has been reported to the IOTC.

In 2017 the IWC Scientific Committee, noting "the considerable data gaps associated with intensive and extensive gillnet fisheries" in the western, central and northern Indian Ocean, recommended that the IWC Secretariat write to the IOTC "to offer help and advice from the [IWC Scientific] Committee in efforts to implement cetacean bycatch data collection and reporting protocols" (IWC 2018). The IWC endorsed this recommendation at its 2018 meeting. In 2019 an IWC workshop in Nairobi

recommended that IWC Contracting Governments improve the quality, quantity and reliability of cetacean bycatch data reported to the IOTC, including for small-scale fisheries, and that the IWC Bycatch Mitigation Initiative explore how it can assist countries in fulfilling their IOTC reporting requirements (IWC 2019). The IWC endorsed the workshop recommendations at its 2022 meeting. In 2024 the IWC Scientific Committee welcomed the strengthening collaboration with the IOTC (IWC 2024), and in 2026 it encouraged IWC Contracting Parties that are IOTC Members to explore opportunities for new IOTC Conservation and Management Measures that could reduce bycatch and recommended that a revised spatial bycatch risk assessment for the western Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea be presented to the WPEB (IWC 2026). In October 2026 the IWC adopted a Management Plan for the Indian Ocean Sanctuary, which identifies the IOTC as the primary partner for addressing cetacean bycatch (IWC 2026).

Many IOTC Members hold commitments on cetacean bycatch in other bodies. The IOTC Executive Summary for cetaceans notes that agreements including the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the IWC "obligate States to provide protection for these species". All IOTC Members are Parties to the CBD, 20 of the 29 are Parties to CMS and 10 are IWC Contracting Governments. CMS Resolution 12.22 (Rev.COP15) on bycatch urges its Parties to "take precautionary measures where bycatch is poorly known or levels are unquantified" (paragraph 2) and calls on those working through regional fisheries bodies "to raise the serious and ongoing challenge of bycatch on CMS-listed species within these fora" (paragraph 13).

Mitigation options

Kiszka et al. (2021) reported that the probability of cetacean bycatch was 78.5% lower in tuna drift gillnets set 2 m below the surface in Pakistan than in surface set nets, with no significant difference in target catch rates. The authors called for further research to confirm the result. WPEB22 noted an IWC pilot study in Sri Lanka comparing subsurface and illuminated gillnets with surface set nets. In preliminary results from related trials the fewest cetacean captures were in subsurface nets, although more data are needed (WPEB22 report, paragraphs 265 to 267). In 2026 the Compliance Committee noted that the Islamic Republic of Iran had issued a guideline that gillnets be set at least 2 m below the surface, and that Sri Lanka had included a similar provision in draft regulation (CoC23 report, paragraph 51). This review takes place under paragraph 24 of Resolution 21/01.

Suggested actions for SC29

The SC may wish to consider the following:

1) **NOTE** paper IOTC-2026-SC29-13, which reviews IOTC commitments on cetacean reporting and mitigation and identifies those that remain unmet.
2) **NOTE** that the 2025 dates in paragraphs 7 and 12 of Resolution 23/06 have passed and that the SC's advice under paragraph 12 does not yet identify specific mitigation measures.
3) **DRAW** the Commission's attention to the fact that the gillnet provisions of Resolution 21/01 are not carried into Resolution 26/01.
4) **ENDORSE** the best practice handling and release guidance recommended by WPEB22, which covers small cetaceans, so that the Commission can consider it in 2027.

5) **ENCOURAGE** all CPCs to report cetacean interactions for all gears as required by paragraphs 3, 4, 9 and 10 of Resolution 23/06, including nil returns, and NOTE that the Commission may wish to consider how implementation of these paragraphs is reviewed.
6) **REQUEST** the WPEB and the Working Party on Data Collection and Statistics (WPDCS) to develop options for collecting cetacean catch data from gillnet vessels operating within EEZs, including port sampling, crew-based reporting and electronic monitoring, building on paragraph 5 of Resolution 23/06 and paragraph 23 of Resolution 21/01.
7) **REQUEST** the Secretariat to provide an annual summary of cetacean interaction reports received, by CPC and gear, and an analysis of the longline records already held.
8) **AGREE** that WPEB23 review the evidence on subsurface setting and other mitigation options, including trial results, national measures and the experimental trial recommended in SC28.12, as a contribution to advice under paragraph 12 of Resolution 23/06.
9) **INVITE** presentation to the WPEB of a revised spatial bycatch risk assessment for the western Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea, as recommended by the IWC Scientific Committee in 2026.

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