



# Mark Carwardine's **AT A GLANCE...**

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## FISHERIES BYCATCH

### WHAT IS FISHERIES BYCATCH?

It is the term used for the staggering number of animals caught incidentally during fishing operations around the world – animals that fishermen usually do not want, cannot sell, or are not allowed to keep. They are simply thrown back over the side, dead or dying. Bycatch is one of the most serious conservation problems in the world today – one that many experts describe as the ‘biggie’.

### WHY DOES IT HAPPEN?

Many fishing techniques are shockingly indiscriminate and few can target a single species without catching other species by mistake. So wherever there is fishing, there is bycatch. Thousands of miles of highly efficient nets and lines are set in the world's oceans every day that catch virtually everything in their paths. Another problem is ‘ghost fishing’, in which unimaginable quantities of fishing gear are abandoned, lost and discarded in the world's oceans every year; they are out of control, yet continue to fish.

### HOW MANY ANIMALS DIE?

Millions every year. There are few precise figures, because much of the damage is done out of sight on the high seas, but it is estimated that bycatch accounts for a staggering 40 per cent of global marine catches. We do know that more than 300,000 whales, dolphins and porpoises, hundreds of thousands of marine turtles, 300,000 seabirds and some 50 million sharks die every

year. Vast numbers of juvenile fish, including the young of commercially valuable species, are also caught and discarded for being undersized. Even invertebrates living on the seafloor do not escape – North Sea bottom trawl fisheries alone are estimated to discard up to 150,000 tonnes of invertebrates annually. Bycatch is one of the main reasons China's Yangtze river dolphin is now extinct and it is threatening the survival of everything from the vaquita (a rare porpoise) and the North Atlantic right whale to 15 out of 22 species of albatross.

### DOES THE FISHING INDUSTRY CARE?

Notorious for its catastrophic mismanagement of fish stocks around the world, and pampered by governments who blatantly ignore all scientific advice, the fishing industry has been slow to respond to bycatch. But it also takes a toll on fishing operations, resulting in wasted time, damaged gear, reduced catches and fishing restrictions, so the industry does sometimes have a vested interest in helping. The good news is that, where fisheries have enforced strict regulations, the results have often been substantial reductions in bycatch.

### WHERE HAS IT BEEN REDUCED?

The best known example is the tuna-fishing industry, which was directly responsible for the deaths of 6 million dolphins in the eastern



A fisherman shovels bycatch overboard, including American yellowtail flounder and little skate.

tropical Pacific but, thanks to public pressure and new regulations, it has reduced the scale of the slaughter dramatically. More recently, albatross deaths around South Georgia have been all but eliminated (although large numbers are still being killed outside territorial waters).

### WHAT ARE THE BEST SOLUTIONS?

This depends on everything from the fishing techniques used to the affected species, but might involve adapting management regulations, directing fishing away from conflict hotspots, seasonal closures of fishing grounds and reducing fishing effort. But solutions also include relatively simple and inexpensive modifications to fishing gear and techniques, such as turtle excluder devices, bright orange streamers to scare birds away and acoustic alarms, called ‘pingers’, which can alert animals to the presence of nets.

**BYCATCH IS ONE OF THE MOST SERIOUS CONSERVATION PROBLEMS IN THE WORLD TODAY - ONE DESCRIBED BY MANY EXPERTS AS THE ‘BIGGIE’.**

### MARK CARWARDINE is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

Every month he demystifies some of the most important issues affecting the world's wildlife and assesses the organisations that protect it.

### WHAT OF THE FUTURE?

Much relies on people in the fishing industry with a conscience and politicians prepared to stand up for wildlife, but a great deal could be achieved by more individuals making careful and informed choices about which seafood they buy. 🐟

### ➕ FIND OUT MORE

Find out more about bycatch at [www.bycatch.org](http://www.bycatch.org)

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