

# Small cetaceans, big problems

Worldwide, a staggering 100,000 small whales, dolphins and porpoises are intentionally killed every year. The motives for this slaughter include the provision of meat for human consumption, bait use in shark fisheries, traditional medicines and the elimination of supposed competitors for an ever-declining number of fish. The majority of killings are illegal and unsustainable, while enforcement of laws remain weak and flourishing black markets are often established.

Since the turn of the 21st century, there has been an unprecedented increase in the number of countries involved, the number of individuals killed and the range of species targeted. This is particularly a problem in places where fish numbers have been depleted, and cetacean meat is seen as a way to meet the food demands of growing, often displaced human populations. However, small whales, dolphins and porpoises accumulate high levels of heavy metals, chlorinated organic compounds and other toxic substances in their bodies. These contaminants compromise their lifespans and fertility, while also presenting an acute health risk for people who consume their flesh.

River and coastal dolphins are especially vulnerable. For example, thousands of Amazon river dolphins (boto) are hunted annually for bait in commercial fisheries. In one river in Brazil, a 50% population decline of the boto was documented between 2004 and 2014. Unfortunately, it may already be too late to reverse the decline for some species, such as the Atlantic humpback dolphin, which is now locally extinct in some coastal areas throughout West Africa and may end up being eaten into oblivion.

In several countries, markets for small cetacean meat have resulted in the

'restyling' of *incidental* bycatch (where individuals are accidentally caught in fishing gear) into *assisted* bycatch (where individuals are not released from fishing gear if found alive). This trend has reinforced increased commercialization and directed hunts. Most small cetaceans are killed using rudimentary methods – for example, being butchered alive in Faroe Island and Japanese hunts, or elsewhere even targeted with dynamite – and individuals suffer prolonged and intensely cruel deaths.

Many countries, both developed and developing, are involved in the annual killing of thousands of small cetaceans – including Canada, Brazil, Venezuela, Greenland, Ghana, Guatemala, India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Malaysia, Japan, Madagascar, Nigeria, Republic of Korea, Solomon Islands and Taiwan. By far the world's largest kill occurs in Peru, where, despite legislation, up to 15,000 dolphins are killed for shark bait every year. Up to several hundred small cetaceans are hunted yearly in the US (Alaska), Cameroon, Tanzania, Colombia, Faroe Islands, Guinea Bissau, Kiribati, Myanmar, Pakistan, Philippines, Vietnam, Papua New Guinea, Senegal, St Lucia, St Vincent and the Grenadines. In Africa, pressure from rapid population growth and declining fish catches has undermined traditional reluctance to consume cetaceans. Small cetacean hunts now occur in many coastal countries, with body parts used for human consumption, medicinal purposes and shark bait. In 2014, one port in Ghana, for example, saw a 400% increase in dolphins landed compared to 2003. Moreover, a recent study found that all countries of South-East and East Asia report directed hunts for marine mammals, as well as the opportunistic use of live and dead marine mammals. In Indonesia, for

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### Keywords

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### More information

For more information on the impacts of hunting on small whales, dolphins and porpoises, see: <https://is.gd/cetaceans>.



A striped dolphin  
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example, a single net positioned in a pelagic migratory corridor caught over 577 pilot whales and 312 unidentified dolphins during one eleven-month 'set'. The creatures killed with this method were processed into pet food for export.

A number of indigenous communities around the world have a history of hunting small cetaceans and a handful of government-sanctioned hunts for 'subsistence hunting' are undertaken. Some hunts, however, remain unregulated, illegally provision tourist or foreign markets and are based on minimal science. In the Arctic, the number of individual cetaceans taken by indigenous peoples has expanded in recent decades, because of human population growth, the introduction of modern hunting techniques and changing sea ice conditions facilitating easier access. Despite many of the hunts being ostensibly managed by a quota system, catch limits are frequently exceeded, while the actual number of small cetaceans killed is higher

because of the large number of animals struck with a weapon but not landed.

Given the multiple anthropogenic threats that small cetaceans face, the uncertain conservation status of many populations, their slow rate of reproduction and the contamination burden they carry, these killings are an appalling and profoundly disturbing additional assault on their lives. The ongoing and increasing massacre of small cetaceans must be stopped, even as we also apply ourselves to end the barrage of other perils they (along with many more marine creatures) face, including habitat destruction, declining prey, toxic pollution and entanglement in fishing nets and gear. ■

#### Further reading

Altherr S and Hodgins N (2018) *Small Cetaceans, Big Problems: A global review of the impacts of hunting on small whales, dolphins and porpoises*. Animal Welfare Institute, Washington, DC, USA, Pro Wildlife, Munich, Germany, and Whale and Dolphin Conservation, Chippenham, UK.



Clockwise from top: whaling in the Faroe Islands (©Erik Christensen); a slaughtered Atlantic white-sided dolphin (©WDC); cut-up harbour porpoise to be sold as food (©Rob Lott/WDC).

Pilot whales  
(©Andrew  
Sutton).

