

# California Driftnet Fishery:

The True Costs of a 20th Century Fishery in the 21st Century



## *Overview*

Turtle Island Restoration Network  
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# ABOUT TURTLE ISLAND



Turtle Island Restoration Network is a leading advocate for the world's oceans and marine wildlife.

Our work is based on science, fueled by people who care, and effective at catalyzing long-lasting positive change that protects the likes of green sea turtles, whale sharks, and coho salmon.

By working with people and communities, we preserve and restore critical habitats like the redwood forested creek banks of California to the full-of-marine-life waters of the Galapagos Islands.

We accomplish our mission through grassroots empowerment, consumer action, strategic litigation, hands-on restoration, environmental education, and by promoting sustainable local, national, and international marine policies.

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## Terminology

*The driftnets in use in the California swordfish fishery are referred to as “drift gill nets” in state and federal technical regulatory documents. In this report, we use the term “driftnet” for these same nets.*

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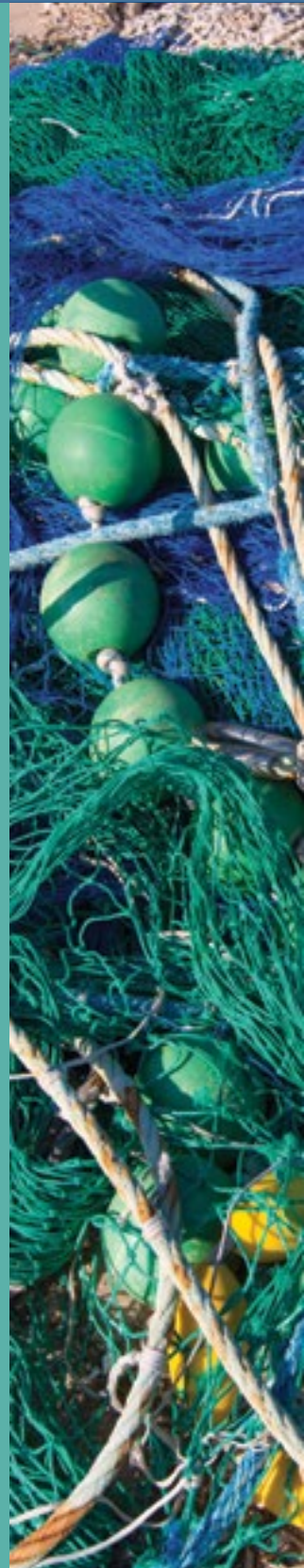
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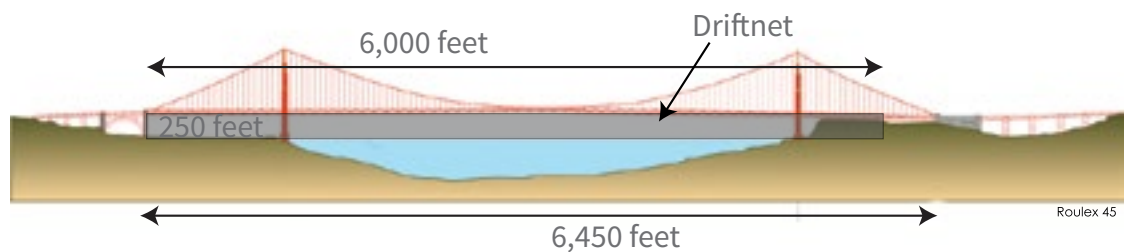




## SNAPSHOT OF THE CALIFORNIA DRIFTNET FISHERY

As scientists are warning that our ocean ecosystems are on the verge of collapse, leaders are taking action to rein in the world's worst industrial fisheries.<sup>i</sup>

Astonishingly, one of those worst offenders is California's driftnet fishery, (also known as the CA drift gillnet fishery). Currently, the fishery consists of a small fleet of roughly 20 active vessels that set nets the size of the Golden Gate Bridge to drift unattended through our oceans.<sup>ii, iii</sup> While the primary targeted commercial species for this fishery are swordfish and shark, these nets entangle everything in their mile-wide path, resulting in high levels of bycatch (unintended catch, most thrown overboard dead or injured).



Over the past ten years, nearly a thousand air-breathing whales, dolphins, and sea turtles have drowned, while thousands of sharks (that depend on constant movement) have suffocated.

In the last ten years, an estimated 26,000 sharks overall were caught by this deadly fishery, with nearly 10,000 simply being tossed overboard. The fishery was especially wasteful in its treatment of blue sharks. In the last decade, 8,186 blue sharks were caught, and an astounding 8,180 were discarded. Of those discarded nearly 5,313 were dead. The fishery also caught an astounding 8,000 common thresher sharks (a candidate species for listing under the U.S. Endangered Species Act) and is further jeopardizing shark populations.<sup>v</sup>

This inherently destructive fishing gear has been banned by the United Nations, on the high seas, by a host of countries, and throughout the United States.<sup>vi, vii, viii, ix</sup> California is the last state in the U.S. to allow this fishing method, which has been described as “invisible curtains of death.”

Essentially, this gear entangles or kills almost everything that becomes entangled, in hopes that some of the thousands of animals caught or killed are swordfish, an expensive luxury product with dangerous levels of mercury. Only one in eight of the animals caught are swordfish.<sup>x</sup>

Given the tremendous difficulty in enforcing environmental laws for such a destructive fishery, U.S. taxpayers bear the cost of managing this economically marginal fishery for almost no benefit. The end result is that the driftnet fishery is a net drag on the U.S. economy.

### *The Driftnet Fishery is One of the World’s Most Destructive Fisheries in Terms of Bycatch (Unwanted Animals Caught & Discarded)*

Despite almost 40 years of management efforts to clean up this fishery, today almost two-thirds of the animals caught by the California driftnet fishery are discarded, placing it among the 20 percent worst fisheries worldwide.<sup>xi, xxi, xxiii</sup> Many of these discarded animals are dead, injured or mortally stressed.

Although ostensibly a swordfish fishery, only one animal in eight caught is a swordfish. A recent analysis by the Pacific Fisheries Management Council shows that the bycatch of high-priority protected species, such as sea turtles or endangered whales, is as high today as it was in the 1990s.<sup>xiv</sup>



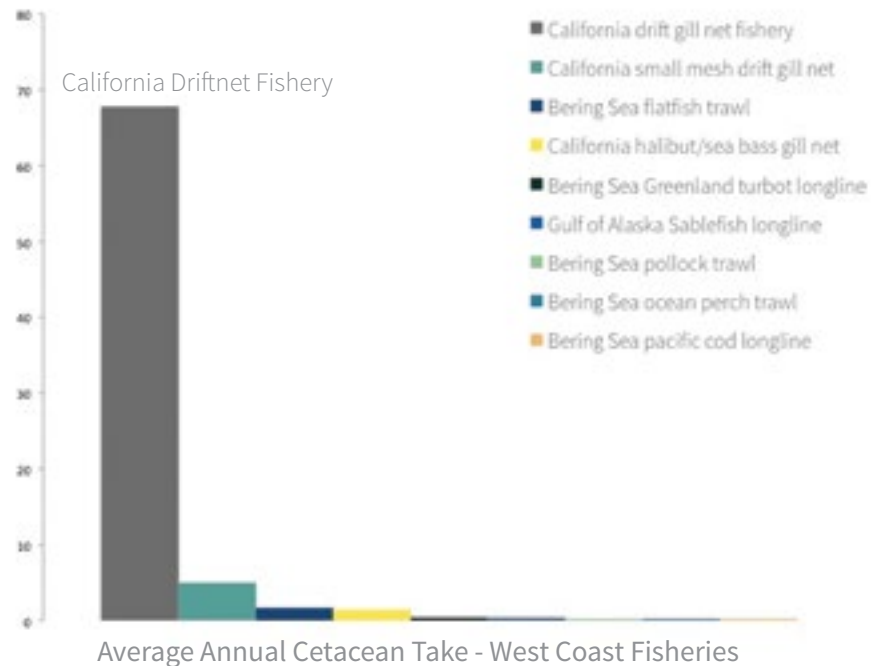


## The Driftnet Fishery Threatens Marine Mammals

The California driftnet fishery kills or injures approximately seven times more whales and dolphins than all other observed fisheries in California, Oregon, Washington, and Alaska combined, and 13 times more than any other single observed fishery on the West Coast.<sup>xv</sup>

This fishery has killed an estimated 16 endangered sperm whales in the last decade.<sup>xvi</sup> Recent stock assessments suggest that this take is more than the population can sustain from all sources combined, much less from a single fishery.<sup>xvii</sup>

Other marine mammals killed include: the bottlenose dolphin, the long-beaked common dolphin, the northern right whale dolphin, the Pacific white-sided dolphin, the Risso's dolphin, the short-beaked common dolphin, the gray whale, the humpback whale, the minke whale, the sperm whale, the shortfin pilot whale, the California sea lion, and the northern elephant seal.<sup>xviii</sup> In total, an estimated 885 marine mammals have been killed in the past decade.<sup>xix</sup>



## *The Driftnet Fishery Threatens Endangered Sea Turtles*

Despite regulatory schemes that have closed more than 250,000 square miles to driftnet fishing to protect sea turtles, the driftnet fishery has still caught an estimated 22 critically endangered leatherback and loggerhead sea turtles since 2001.<sup>xx</sup>

The Pacific leatherback has declined by over 90 percent since the 1980s, and it appears headed to extinction by 2030 if current trends are not reversed.<sup>xxi, xxii, xxiii, xxiv</sup> The annual nesting population of western Pacific leatherbacks is estimated to be 1,438 mature individuals.<sup>xxv</sup> Recent scientific analyses show that killing more than one leatherback every six years (from all fisheries and other human activities combined) will significantly hamper recovery efforts, but current regulations allow six times that amount.<sup>xxvi</sup> Since a leatherback was killed in 2015 by derelict crab pot fishing gear, the populations can tolerate no further mortalities for another six years.<sup>xxvii</sup>

*The driftnet fishery has still caught an estimated 22 critically endangered leatherback & loggerhead sea turtles since 2001.*<sup>xx</sup>



Courtesy of Doug Helton  
NOAA/NOS/ORR/ERD.





## *The Driftnet Fishery Threatens Sharks*

The California driftnet fishery kills thousands of sharks each year, catching more sharks than swordfish, including 18 species of sharks and rays. Nine of these species are listed as ‘threatened’ or ‘vulnerable’ under the U.S. Endangered Species Act.<sup>xxviii</sup>



A shark illustration by nine-year-old Francisco to his Assemblymember asking for marine wildlife protections.

In fact, 820 blue sharks are caught on average each year with all them discarded, the vast majority already dead, the rest injured.

In the last decade, this fishery caught an estimated 15 megamouth sharks, a species so rare that it is only known to science from 100 specimens worldwide.<sup>xxvix</sup> This species is so rare we will never be able to know whether the fishery is driving it to extinction until it vanishes.

## *The Driftnet Fishery Targets Toxic Mercury-laden Fish*

Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment, 2008.



California requires mercury warning signs in supermarkets selling swordfish, shark & tuna.

The U.S. FDA and EPA warn women of childbearing age and children to never eat swordfish and shark, the target species of the California driftnet fishery.<sup>xxx</sup> Larger, longer-lived, top-of-the-food-chain marine species, such as swordfish and shark, have the highest levels of mercury in their tissue.

Consumption of toxic, mercury-laden fish is a widespread public health problem, especially for women of childbearing age, pregnant and nursing women, and children. Mercury ingestion can lead to developmental and learning disorders, vision loss, heart disease, memory loss, and, in extreme cases, death.<sup>xxxi</sup>



## *The Driftnet Fishery is a Net Drag on the California Economy*

In addition to impacts on marine biodiversity, the driftnet fishery is expensive to manage, has little relative economic benefit, and is a net loss to the U.S. economy. The total revenue from the California driftnet fishery over the past three years has averaged a mere \$750,000, while enforcement and management costs borne by taxpayers to “manage” this fishery are estimated to range between \$1.3 million to \$2.7 million a year. <sup>xxxii, xxxiii</sup>

The California driftnet fishery:

- Provides revenue of less than three-tenths of one percent of the California fishing industry; <sup>xxxiv</sup>
- Replaced the zero-bycatch California harpoon fishery and lands only a fraction of the historic target catch. The harpoon fishery also produced fresher, higher-quality and more economically-valuable fish;
- Appears to cost U.S. taxpayers more to manage than the value of the fish caught; and <sup>xxxv, xxxvi</sup>
- Has a vastly higher ecological impact for the value than other California fisheries.

If the driftnet fishery were as clean per dollar of revenue as the average fishery in California, the driftnet fleet would only catch one whale or dolphin once every 266 years, instead of more than 60 *each year*. <sup>xxxvii</sup>





## *The Driftnet Fishery Undermines International Efforts to Clean Up Foreign Fisheries*

Moving foreign governments to improve their fisheries depends on maintaining high standards in the United States. In addition to diplomatic efforts to persuade foreign governments, U.S. law provides legal tools to impose sanctions on foreign fisheries that do not match U.S. standards. However, keeping destructive fisheries alive in California allows foreign fleets that kill large numbers of marine mammals to continue to sell their seafood to U.S. consumers. As long as the U.S. keeps these damaging fisheries around, other countries can as well.<sup>xxxvii</sup> The biggest losers from this race to the bottom are our ocean ecosystems, and the people of the world whose heritage is closely tied to these species.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. California Must Phase Out the Use of Driftnets Immediately**  
Provide Funding for a Fishery Transition Plan
- 2. Employ Only Highly Selective Gear in the Swordfish Fishery**  
Transition Away from Harvest of Mercury-laden Fish
- 3. Keep Protected Areas Closed**  
Expand Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) to Better Protect Ocean Biodiversity

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- xxxviii. See Section 101(a)(2) of the Marine Mammal Protection Act, 16 U.S.C. § 1372, the Moratorium Protection Act, 16 U.S.C. § 1826-k, and the Pelly Amendment, 22 U.S.C. § 1978.

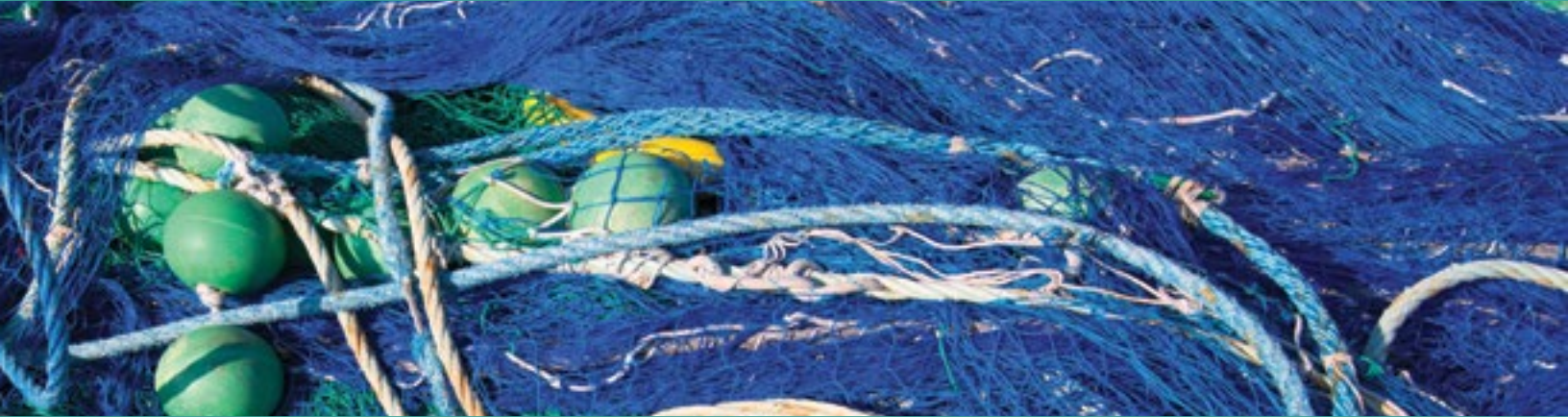


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