



- Earth home
- Earth news
- Earth watch
- Comment
- Greener living
- Earth Pulse

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Messageboards

Announcements

- Arts
- Blogs
- Comment
- Crossword
- Dating
- Digital Life
- Earth
- Education
- Expat
- Family
- Fantasy Games
- Fashion
- Features
- Food & Drink
- Football
- Gardening
- Health
- Horoscopes
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- Science
- Sudoku
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- Your Money
- Your view

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## New Zealand under pressure over rare dolphins

By Ian Wood  
Last Updated: 1:01pm GMT 19/03/2008

New Zealand is being urged by conservationists to do more to protect two highly endangered species of dolphins.

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Gill netting and trawling have pushed both the Maui and Hector dolphin populations to the brink of extinction.

Both breeds only occur in New Zealand and their numbers have declined dramatically in recent years.

Hector dolphins have dropped from an estimated population of 26,000 in the 1970s to under 7,000 today and the situation for the Maui dolphin is even worse.

A staggering 90 per cent of these unique animals have died in fishing nets and the latest survey indicated a population of just 111 making them the most endangered dolphin in the world.

A decision on the level of protection for Hector and Maui dolphin populations is currently under review by the New Zealand government and pressure has increased with the release of photographs of 22 common dolphins killed in trawler nets off North Island's west coast last December.

Chris Howe, the executive director of the WWF's New Zealand branch, said they were proof that current fishing controls are failing to protect endangered dolphins.

He said the deaths showed that the fishing industry cannot be trusted to follow the voluntary code of practice that currently protects the species. The government-imposed code was set up to minimise accidental capture of dolphins during trawl fishing.

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Maui dolphins that were caught and died in the nets of a New Zealand fishing trawler

"All fishing with set nets and trawl nets should be banned throughout the range of Hector's and Maui's dolphins," Howe said. "That's the only way to ensure a slow-breeding, rare species can recover."

Conservation Minister Steve Chadwick said she was "not surprised" that conservation groups are calling for nets to be withdrawn.

"We'll have to consider how realistic that is while we also have sustainable fishing and how we will manage protection of those endangered species," she said.

Owen Symmans, chief executive of the New Zealand Seafood Industry Council, said the "accidental capture" of 22 dolphins was regrettable.

"Nobody wants to catch dolphins, common or otherwise, and fishermen... feel gutted about this sort of thing," he said. "It's the last thing that they want in their nets."

He said trawlers move away "as soon as dolphin are seen," and the industry is committed to trying to avoid such events.

Research funded by the conservation group Care For The Wild International has shown that the remaining Maui dolphins live in areas that are unprotected. Only complete protection against fishing related mortality will save them from extinction.

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