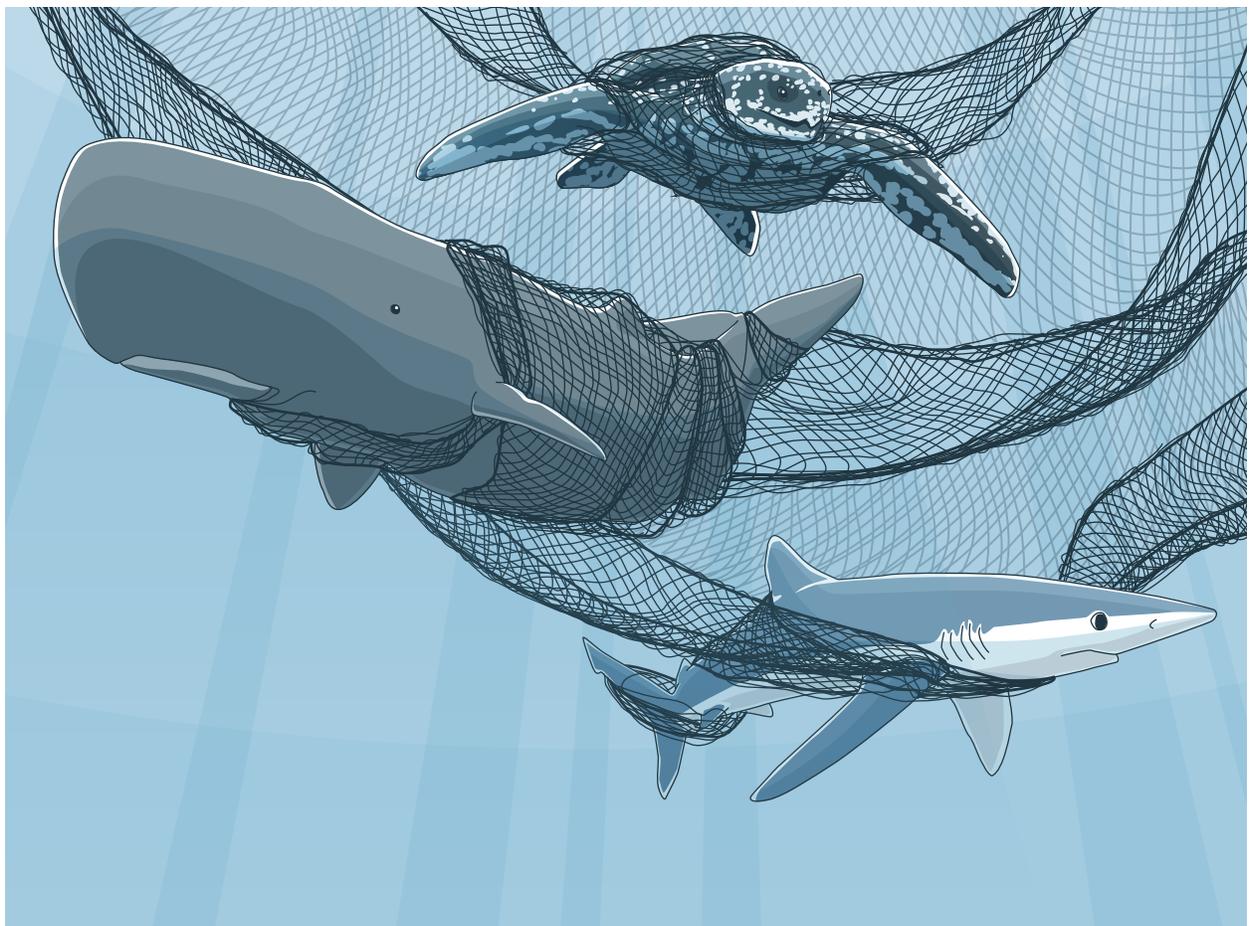




Let's Find a Better Way to Catch Pacific Swordfish

Drift gillnets target swordfish but indiscriminately kill other animals, too, including many species of game fish, sharks, marine mammals, and Pacific leatherback sea turtles.



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Swordfish caught off the coast of California is a prized seafood delicacy. Sadly, the predominant method of catching this abundant fish, called drift gillnetting, kills many species of marine mammals, fish, sharks, and turtles the fishermen never intended to catch. We can do better. It's time to investigate shifting to alternatives—such as deep-set buoy gear—that enable fishermen to catch swordfish while leaving other marine life in the water where it belongs.

A fishery with unintended consequences

Off the California coast, nets as long as a mile are submerged for hours at a time to catch swordfish and thresher sharks. The problem is that these nets also entangle and kill other animals the fishermen never intended to catch—including whales, turtles, sharks, dolphins, and many species of fish.

Thousands of nontarget animals are caught in these impenetrable walls, a problem known as bycatch, including endangered sperm whales, Pacific leatherback turtles, and valuable but severely depleted game fish such as bluefin tuna. In fact, the severe injury and death of two sperm whales in December 2010 prompted federal fishery managers to enact a temporary emergency rule requiring observers on all drift gillnet boats.



Photo: NOAA

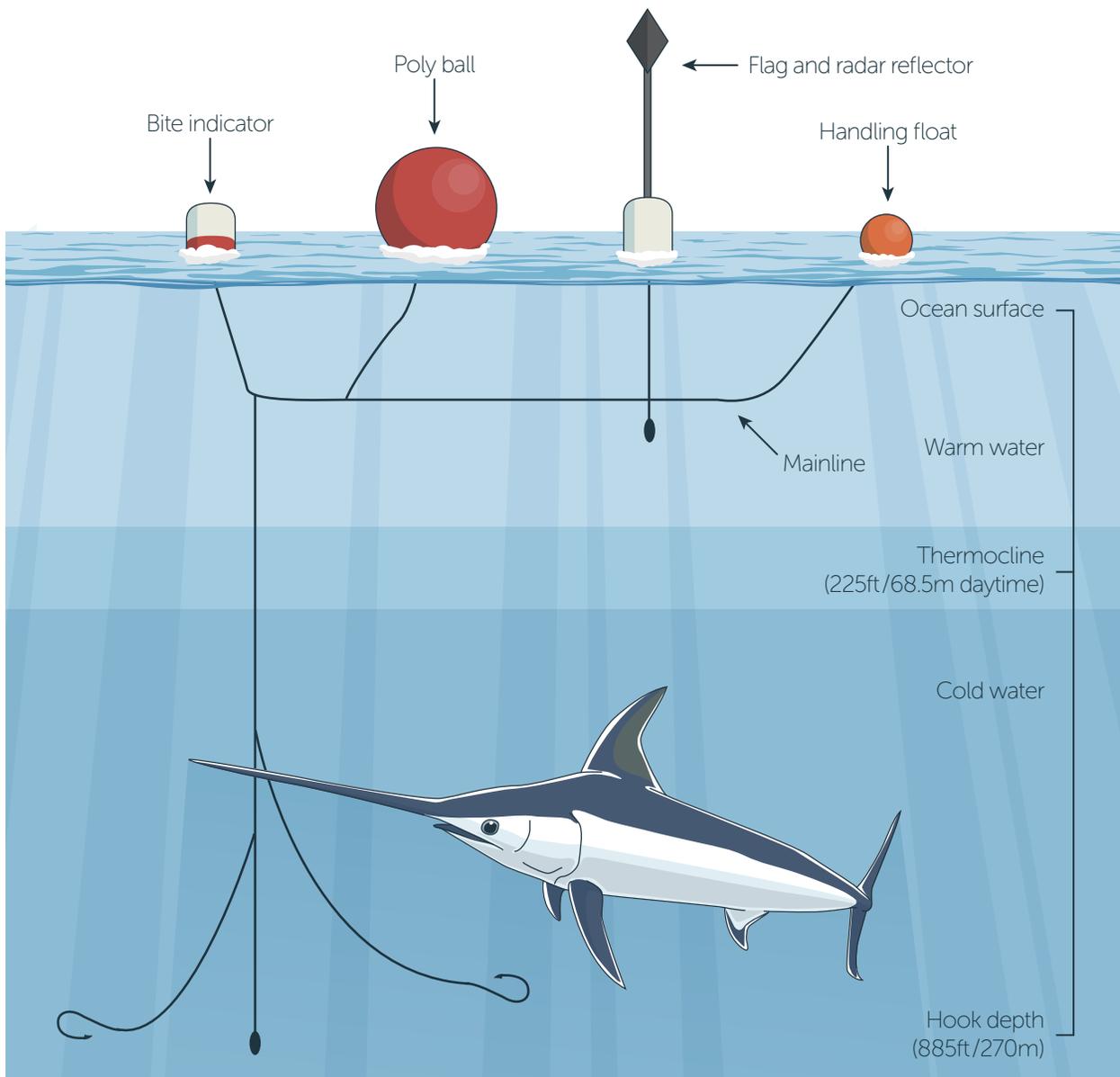
Drift gillnets targeting swordfish also entangle many other species of marine life, including the pilot whale shown here.

Despite recent changes, drift gillnets continue to have unacceptably high levels of wasteful bycatch. It's time for West Coast fishery managers to phase out the use of drift gillnets. We can end the discard of nontarget fish ensnared by them and stop the senseless killing of rare animals by simply using alternative fishing methods.

20% The proportion of drift gillnet fishing trips accompanied by federally certified observers, as of 2013.

Finding a Better Alternative

Deep-set buoy gear, depicted here, is one of the alternative types of gear being explored by researchers and fishermen to catch swordfish and thresher sharks while minimizing harm to other animals.



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The past and future offer other ways to continue catching swordfish and thresher sharks. Fishermen primarily used harpoons to catch swordfish, with virtually no bycatch or harm to nontarget animals, until they started targeting swordfish with drift gillnets in the 1980s. Today, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and other organizations are exploring alternative types of fishing gear to reduce the wasteful catch of marine species, including the use of deep-set buoy gear that drops hooks deep enough to reach swordfish while avoiding other animals closer to the surface.

Federal fisheries managers should:

1. Require 100 percent observer coverage on all trips and close the fishery for the season if a drift gillnet entangles any protected species, such as a sperm whale or leatherback sea turtle.
2. Support the transition of the fleet to more selective gear.

Take action:

Contact the Pacific Fishery Management Council at pfmc.comments@noaa.gov. Ask the council to keep drift gillnets out of currently protected areas and instead shift the fishery for swordfish and thresher sharks to sustainable gear types that minimize wasteful bycatch of marine animals.

For further information, please visit:

pewenvironment.org/pacificfish.

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