

Action demanded after 1,100 dead dolphins wash up in France

March 28 2019, by Thomas Adamson



This photo taken on March 7, 2019 and provided by the Observatoire Pelagis shows dead dolphins on a shore of La Tranche sur Mer, on the Atlantic coast, western France. France has been shaken into action after a record number of dead dolphins have washed up on the country's Atlantic coast this year, many clearly victims of industrial fishing. More than a 1,000 corpses, according to French marine researchers—death toll that has alarmed animal welfare groups and prompted France's ecology minister to launch a national plan to protect them. (Cecile Dars, Observatoire Pelagis/CNRS/Universite de la Rochelle via AP)

The dolphins' bodies were horribly mutilated, the fins cut off.

But what shocked French marine researchers wasn't just the brutality of the deaths of these highly intelligent mammals, but the numbers involved—a record 1,100 have landed on France's Atlantic coast beaches since January.

The mass deaths, widely blamed on industrial fishing, have alarmed animal welfare groups and prompted France's ecology minister to launch a national plan to protect them.

"There's never been a number this high," said Willy Daubin, a member of La Rochelle University's National Center for Scientific Research. "Already in three months, we have beaten last year's record, which was up from 2017 and even that was the highest in 40 years."

Though Daubin said 90 percent of the fatalities resulted from the dolphins being accidentally captured in industrial fishing nets, the reason behind the spike this year is a mystery.

"What fishing machinery or equipment is behind all these deaths?" he asked.

Autopsies carried out on the dolphins this year by La Rochelle University's National Center for Scientific Research show extreme levels of mutilation.



This photo taken on Feb.13, 2019 and provided by the Observatoire Pelagis shows a dead dolphin on a shore of Jard sur Mer on the Atlantic coast, western France. France has been shaken into action after a record number of dead dolphins have washed up on the country's Atlantic coast this year, many clearly victims of industrial fishing. (Willy Dabin, Observatoire Pelagis/CNRS/Universite de la Rochelle via AP)

Activists say it's common for fishermen to cut body parts off the suffocated dolphins after they are pulled up on the nets, to save the nets.

French Ecology Minister Francois de Rugy rushed last week to La Rochelle in an attempt to lower the number of dolphins dying as a result of humans. He's under pressure, partly due to French President Emmanuel Macron's pro-ecology stance and oft-quoted slogan to "Make the Planet Great Again."

Rugy has come up with some plans, including bolstering research into existing acoustic repellent devices in place in 26 two-vessel trawlers off the Bay of Biscay, an industrial fishing hub in the Atlantic Ocean. When activated, the devices send unpleasant signals to nearby dolphins that cause them to swim away.

But animal rights group Sea Shepherd said his measures do not go far enough, and has already decried the acoustic repellents as "useless."



This photo taken on Feb.6, 2019 and provided by the Observatoire Pelagis shows a scientist standing by a dead dolphin in Chatelaillon-les-Boucholeurs on the Atlantic coast, western France. France has been shaken into action after a record number of dead dolphins have washed up on the country's Atlantic coast this year, many clearly victims of industrial fishing. More than a 1,000 corpses, according to French marine researchers—death toll that has alarmed animal welfare groups and prompted France's ecology minister to launch a national plan to protect them. (Jerome Spitz, Observatoire Pelagis/CNRS/Universite de la Rochelle via AP)

It claims many of the trawlers they watch in the region don't activate the repellent devices, fearing they will scare off valuable fish as well, and only turn them on if they are being checked fishing monitors.

It also said increasing the number of repellent devices is not a long-term solution, since that makes the oceans an uninhabitable drum of noise pollution for all mammals and fish.

"The government needs to take responsibility and act—especially Macron, who said he wanted to protect ecology," Lamyia Essemblali, President of Sea Shepherd France, told The Associated Press.

She cited scientists who predict that the current rates of fishing will likely drive the dolphin population to extinction.



This photo taken on Feb. 10, 2019 and provided by the Observatoire Pelagis shows a dead dolphin on a shore of Rivedoux, Ré island on the Atlantic coast, western France. France has been shaken into action after a record number of dead dolphins have washed up on the country's Atlantic coast this year, many clearly victims of industrial fishing. More than a 1,000 corpses, according to French marine researchers—death toll that has alarmed animal welfare groups and prompted France's ecology minister to launch a national plan to protect them. (Helene Peltier, Observatoire Pelagis/CNRS/Universite de la Rochelle via AP)

"The spotlight has been put on the trawlers that fish for sea bass ..., which is a scandal. But they were not the only ones responsible," she said.

She suggested that aggressive hake fishing, which was given the green light three years ago after a long ban, was a major factor. The spike in dolphin deaths also began three years ago.

Her group says the ecological crisis stems from unprecedented demand for low-cost fish.

"Right now, the sea bass that is being caught by the trawlers that kill dolphins you can find on the French market for 8 euros per kilogram (\$4 per pound)," she said.

Global seafood consumption has more than doubled in the past 50 years, according to European Commission, a rate that rights groups have branded unsustainable.



This photo taken on Feb. 7, 2019 and provided by the Observatoire Pelagis shows dead dolphins lined up in La Tremblade on the Atlantic coast, western France. France has been shaken into action after a record number of dead dolphins have washed up on the country's Atlantic coast this year, many clearly victims of industrial fishing. More than a 1,000 corpses, according to French marine researchers—death toll that has alarmed animal welfare groups and prompted France's ecology minister to launch a national plan to protect them. (Olivier van Canneyt, Observatoire Pelagis/CNRS/Universite de la Rochelle via AP)

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