

Practices that reduce the risk of whale entanglements

Rock lobster fishermen should:

- remain vigilant between May and November;
- avoid excessive slack in pot ropes, particularly between May and November;
- adjust ropes to a length appropriate to the depth and strength of tide being worked, especially inshore. Excess slack in pot ropes can be coiled and tied close to floats. Slack should be limited to enough rope to allow for recovery and to commence hauling safely (Dog bone / shanking);
- where possible avoid setting pots in clusters;
- regularly check pots, as per standard fishing practice. The Disentanglement teams have a greater chance of success if the entanglement is discovered quickly;
- keep up to date contact details aboard on the correct people to contact when entanglements are found (see below);
- not leave pots in the water if not fishing for prolonged periods (> than 7 days). Pots should be retained on board or returned to shore when they are not fishing for prolonged periods;
- collect any abandoned / lost or cut pot lines, rope or fishing gear; and
- investigate new technologies that may reduce entanglements.

Benefits of the Code of Practice

1. As a conservation measure to assist in protecting whales from entanglement.
2. The profile of the rock lobster industry can be improved by:
 - ◇ their direct involvement in the reduction of whale entanglements by acknowledging best fishing practices at industry level; and their involvement in the disentanglement program.
3. Avoiding loss of gear and catch from lost lobster pots.
4. Safe working practice for boat crews to avoid injuries.
5. An established disentanglement network. The need exists for fast reporting of incidents so the disentanglement process can begin.

What to do if encountering a whale entanglement.

- Report entanglements as soon as possible. Rapid reporting ensures entanglement response teams have the best possible chance of successfully disentangling whales. Fishers should monitor entanglement situations, with due regard for the safety of the vessel and the whale, until assistance teams arrive;
- Where possible, stand-by the entangled whale. This enables the disentanglement team to find the whale quicker and gain all the necessary information from the fisher prior to attempting disentanglement;
- Fishers should NOT attempt to cut the whale free, as the attached line allows a safe working line for the disentanglement team; and
- adopt a cooperative approach to responding to entanglements when they occur. Fishers can voluntarily participate in Department training programs for involvement in disentanglement operations. This training will ensure that fishers are aware of procedures and are familiar with disentanglement team personnel.

The readiness, local knowledge and vessel handling skills of fishers are beneficial to disentanglement operations.

Fishers should not attempt disentanglement of whales without the assistance of the WA Government's Whale Disentanglement Team.

West Coast Rock Lobster Managed Fishery



Code of Practice for Reducing Whale Entanglements



Important Contact Information

To notify of an entanglement call:

08 9219 9840

or

08 9474 9055

www.wrlc.com.au
ceo@wrlc.com.au
T 08 9432 7721
M 0409 581 742

Introduction



The Western Rock Lobster Council developed a Whale Entanglement Code of Practice (CoP) in 2007 in association with Government and

non-government agencies to reduce interactions with whales in Western Australian waters. Through a consultation process involving a range of stakeholders it was recognised that a CoP was necessary. This CoP is specifically aimed at minimising entanglement of whales in rock lobster pot lines, although the strategies proposed will also minimise entanglements with other marine wildlife. This review of the CoP was completed in 2013.

The CoP helps the industry to make progress against the following Government and management considerations:

- ⇒ Fishing activities in which fishing gear is set, using trailing ropes or tethered buoys, is identified as a potentially threatening process, particularly for migrating Southern Right and Humpback Whales which are protected under the Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act) and the Western Australian Wildlife Conservation Act 1950;
- ⇒ Whale entanglements are recognised as a management issue by West Coast Rock Lobster Fishery Management; and
- ⇒ Whale entanglements and the need for disentanglement training are recognized as a priority issue by the Western Australian and Australian Governments.

The Rock Lobster Fishery

The professional rock lobster fishery is the most valuable single-species wild harvest fishery in Australia, providing major economic benefits for Western Australia. In 2000 it was the first fishery in the world to be certified by the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) as a well-managed and sustainable fishery. The fishery was declared limited entry in 1963 when boat and pot numbers were frozen. In November 2011 pots available for use in the fishery was halved. From 2013 the fishery became a quota managed fishery with a 12 month continuous fishing season whilst still retaining 50% pot numbers.

The fishery is managed in 3 zones: south of Latitude 30°S (C Zone); north of latitude 30°S (B Zone); and, within this northern area, a third offshore zone (A Zone) around the Abrolhos Islands.

Rock lobsters are found right along the western coast of the State but over 90% of the catch is taken from between Kalbarri and Cape Leeuwin. Rock lobsters are harvested using baited pots set on coastal reefs in depths up to 200m. Pots are normally set and hauled individually with a line running from each pot to surface floats. Soak times can be from 1-4 days.

Environmental Management

The 2007 assessment of the Western Rock Lobster Fishery by the Australian Government for export approval identified a number of areas that required attention. These included: information collection and monitoring to be continued; pot deployment practices in shallow water; and continuing collaboration between Fisheries WA and the industry to review management strategies.

In the 2013 assessment the Australian Government accredited the management regime for the Western Australian Rock Lobster Managed Fishery subject to a number of conditions including implementing interim measures to reduce the risk of the fishery interacting with migrating whales in 2013 through supporting the update of the Western Australian West Coast Rock Lobster Managed Fishery Code of Practice for Reducing Whale Entanglements.



Whale Ecology and Management

In Western Australia there are some whale species more vulnerable due to their migratory patterns. The most vulnerable is probably the Southern Right Whale (*Eubalaena australis*) listed under the EPBC Act as an endangered species. Other species likely to be affected in WA waters are migrating Humpback Whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) and the critically endangered Blue Whale (*Balaenoptera musculus*). See www.wrlc.com.au/whalechart.

The characteristics of some species that may lead to vulnerability are:

Southern Right Whale:

- ⇒ Slow swimming, migrates through coastal waters, breeds inshore in coastal waters during winter between May to October
- ⇒ Has rough callosities on head and very long baleen, which could increase the risk of entanglements
- ⇒ Difficult to disentangle due to uncooperative nature

Humpback Whale:

- ⇒ Migrates Northward through Western Australian waters during late May to August, returning Southward, September to December
- ⇒ Slow swimming, has very long flippers with knobby leading edges

Blue Whale:

- ⇒ Fast streamlined whale; feeds in West Australian waters from December to May
- ⇒ Danger of entanglement in baleen or flippers while feeding
- ⇒ Size and power could make it very difficult to rescue

The scale of whale entanglement in fishing gear varies from state to state. Entanglement figures for confirmed Western Rock Lobster Fishery gear 1990 – 2012 (inc) is 49 incidents of a total 96 incidents that include all categories of entanglement. The Humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) is the species principally entangled in WRL gear (47 out of 49), there was one Southern Right whale (*Eubalaena australis*) and one Bryde's whale (*Balaenoptera edeni*). The likelihood of further entanglements occurring in WA will increase as whale numbers increase.

There is a particular concern about whale entanglements because of their size. Whale entanglements present complex and often dangerous situations that require specialist skills and training if the whale is to be released unharmed. In addition, there is increasing public interest and concern about such events when they do occur.