

Threats to the Moray Firth Dolphins



Cumulative Impacts

The combined effects of these threats are a serious cause for concern, particularly for the small and isolated population of bottlenose dolphins. There are many new developments in the Moray Firth region - several are of a large scale and long-term nature - WDCS is not only concerned about the impact of each one but also their cumulative effects, where their combined effects may be greater than the sum of their individual impacts. It is important to ensure that the Marine Bill and other relevant legislation fully consider cumulative impacts and consider impacts across sectors.

Fishing

Commercial fishing occurs in the Moray Firth, including the SAC, throughout the year. Fisheries include otter trawling for nephrops (scampi), beam trawling, seine netting, scallop dredge and trawling, mussel and oyster dredging, cockle dredging, salmon netting, creeling for lobsters, crabs and whelks, use of hand lines and semi-pelagic fishing for squid.

Of particular concern is illegal salmon netting, although its full extent is unknown. It poses a significant threat to the bottlenose dolphins within the Moray Firth. Entanglement in active (or discarded and lost) salmon nets is the primary concern. Whales, dolphins and other marine life also become entangled in other fishing gear from time to time in the Moray Firth and this often leads to their death.

In addition, in aquaculture, which involves rearing caged fish and invertebrate species, chemical treatments are usually needed to manage facilities and the escape of non-native farmed species can cause genetic problems when they mix with native. Fish farms also use noisy devices to deter seals from feeding on the farmed species, and these devices can displace cetaceans from important habitats.

Oil and gas exploration, development and decommissioning

Exploration blocks within the two SACs designated in Scotland and Wales for bottlenose dolphins were included in the recent government licensing round. Protests initiated the government to further investigate whether licensing should be allowed within these small areas.

The Moray Firth has been the subject of considerable oil and gas activities for many years. There are oil and gas platforms in the outer Moray Firth, adjacent to the SAC, and oil pipelines and an oil terminal lie within the SAC. Talisman's Beatrice field is just 13 miles offshore and Chevron's Captain field sits on the edge of the Outer Firth, 37 miles north of Fraserburgh. The past few years have also seen a substantial increase in applications for oil and gas exploration licenses in the Moray Firth. The Crown holds all rights to the UK's petroleum resources. However, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry can grant licenses that allow exclusive rights to explore for, and exploit, oil and gas resources.

Considerable boat traffic associated with the industry occurs in the SAC. Decommissioning will occur in the outer Moray Firth in the future. Our major concerns are noise and chemical pollution associated with these industrial activities, including seismic surveying and decommissioning, using explosives.

Tourism

We have to take care that our leisure activities do not have a negative impact on the dolphins. Numbers of visitors increase every year, including cetacean watchers and recreational boaters. Marine wildlife tourism earns £57 m annually for the Scottish economy and directly provides over 2,500 jobs and this is expected to increase by as much as 50% in the next decade. An increase in tourism is great for the Scottish economy and therefore Scottish people. This increase needs to be sensitive to the needs of the dolphins too, where Scottish waters are also their home!

Visiting the dolphins?

Take a trip to the WDCS Wildlife Centre (<http://www.wdcs.org/wildlifecentre>). Look for the Moray Firth dolphins from land at Chanonry point and many other vantage points along the Moray Firth Dolphin and Seal coastal path. If you go out on a dolphin watching boat, ask if your captain is in compliance with the Dolphin Space Program. Be aware of the Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code.

Marine renewable energy (including wind farms, wave and tidal farms)

Development of offshore renewable energy projects is occurring worldwide and the UK is taking a lead. Offshore renewable energy developments are typically characterised as environmentally desirable, and WDCS supports these. There are, however, some potentially adverse impacts associated with these developments that deserve careful consideration. The renewable energy industry is still in its infancy and not all of its impacts are clear or fully assessed. WDCS assesses renewable projects on a case-by-case basis and believes that renewable energy does not have to come at the expense of the environment. Placement of wet renewable devices is a primary consideration. The government needs to act now to promote and investigate climate change issues ([link to climate change page](#)).

A 'Demonstrator Windfarm' has been developed very close to the Beatrice oil platform, where two 5MW turbines have been installed in water depths of 45 metres. Intense underwater noise associated with the construction of the turbines, and noise during the operational phase, and from associated boat traffic, has the potential to impact on this vulnerable dolphin population and the other marine species that frequent the area, including seals and minke whales.

If this demonstrator windfarm project is successful, it is likely that a 200-turbine windfarm will be built in the area. The creation of a commercial offshore windfarm at this location could provide up to 1GW of installed capacity for supply to the National Grid. This would be equivalent to almost 20% of Scotland's electricity demand. If the decision is made to proceed with a commercial windfarm in the Beatrice field, a second full EA (including consultation) will be undertaken

WDCS understands the need to invest in renewable energy and fully supports measures to mitigate climate change. However, we question the location of such a large development in an area deemed important to wildlife at a European level.

Marine litter

Worldwide, discarded or lost rubbish and fisheries gear kill thousands of animals every year through entanglement or ingestion. It is one of the least recognised, but large scale, threats to all cetaceans occurring throughout the world's oceans. In the last year large whales have been killed in Scottish waters due to marine litter and large whales and a bottlenose dolphin have been killed by marine litter in the MF in recent years.

[You can help](#) - Take part in a beach clean - you can do this through the WDCS Wildlife Centre and the Marine Conservation Society.

Construction of inshore developments – e.g. marinas, bridges, sewage pipes

As many as ten licenses for marine construction works, of varying magnitudes, are granted within, and adjacent to, the dolphins SAC boundary in a year. WDCS believes that developments have to be sensitive to the Scottish marine environment.

In particular, we are concerned about the proposed residential and leisure development at Whiteness Head, Ardersier. The proposed 500 berth marina will lead to a dramatic increase in boat traffic in a very small area. This area is particularly important for the Moray Firth bottlenose dolphins who are frequently observed feeding off Chanonry Point, as well as seals that haul out on the site. Increases in levels of underwater noise and disturbance from boats in the area are likely to disrupt the behaviour of the dolphins and potentially displace them from areas important for their survival. Such a large increase in boat traffic in a relatively small area also increases the possibility of dolphins being struck by vessels. The developers have been granted outline planning permission, and now they will need to apply for detailed planning permission.