

# East Coast Whale Entanglement Mitigation Program

## Update 1

As Humpback whale populations in the southern hemisphere recover from past commercial whaling, the potential for interactions between whales and commercial fishing operations is increasing, with most entanglements occurring since 2006. Most entanglement incidents involve Humpback whales, a species listed as a Vulnerable within the Commonwealth EPBC Act and NSW Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016.

In the past few years, there has been an increase in media reports relating to whale entanglement in fishing gear and an increase in community awareness and concern for animal welfare and bycatch issues. Whale media in NSW in 2018/19 had a public reach of 223 million.

Preliminary assessment of reported whale entanglements in New South Wales has confirmed a variety of sources including NSW set fishing gear. Entanglements assessed as being associated with NSW set fishing gear include configurations used in the demersal fish trap, spanner crab, demersal setline and lobster trap fisheries, with higher incidents in demersal fish trap sector and lower incidents in the other sectors.

An initial workshop was held in mid September to set an overall direction for the East Coast Whale Entanglement Mitigation Program.

The workshop was attended by 34 participants, including 15 NSW fishers and scientists as well as representatives from Western Australia, Victoria, Tasmania, Queensland and the Commonwealth.

Open workshop discussion encouraged fishers to consider solutions, both within and outside current fishery practices and management regulations. Following workshop discussion there was strong agreement among attendees for the following four actions:

1. Trial gear and techniques to reduce entanglements.
2. Develop a NSW OTL Code of Practice for whale entanglements.
3. Develop and complete a gear survey throughout the NSW OTL.
4. Investigate options for funding of further research.



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## Whale Code of Practice

Following the workshop, a NSW OTL Whale Code of Practice has been developed and adopted by the PFA. The Whale CoP is a supplement to the existing NSW OTL CoP previously developed by OceanWatch and adopted by NSW OTL fishers through the OceanWatch Master Fishermen training and assessment program, and is designed to assist fishers to reduce the incidence of, and risks associated with, whale entanglements in fishing gear.

Current best practice fishing advice includes limiting slack rope in the water column, and avoiding excessive knots on ropes.

The Code will be regularly reviewed as further knowledge regarding whale specific best practice fishing operations for NSW OTL fishers becomes available.

## Gear Trials

Gear trials will be undertaken by NSW OTL fishers, commencing early 2020, to determine the practical utility and safety aspects of gear modifications that may potentially minimise whale entanglement. These trials will determine potential for uptake of gear modifications by other NSW OTL fishers, and provide focus for further scientific trials to determine whale entanglement mitigation.

Planning for the gear trials is underway, including applications for permits to allow trials to proceed using gears currently outside management regulations (sunken head gear).

NSW OTL fishers who have an interest in participating in the field trials should contact Brad Warren – [brad.warren61@gmail.com](mailto:brad.warren61@gmail.com) – 0412606959

The final report of the East Coast Whale Entanglement Mitigation Program workshop final report and the NSW OTL Whale Code of Practice are both available for download at the OceanWatch website.