

Explained

The Longline Tug-of-War

Killer and sperm whales are scoring easy meals at the expense of fishermen, and Briana Bowman, an Alaskan fisheries observer, shares the scoop.

By Briana Bowman

Given my impending frugality as a grad student, I have been scouring the Internet for ways to get my favorite foods for cheap, or ideally free. Unfortunately, Chipotle does not seem to be overly generous with coupons for barbacoa burritos, but a girl can dream, right? In many ways, I relate to orcas and sperm whales trying to score an easy meal. Have you tried black cod, aka sablefish? It's delicious. Am I saying black cod is the Chipotle barbacoa burrito with guacamole-that'll-be-an-extra-10-dollars-is-that-ok-YES-SHUT-UP-AND-TAKE-MY-MONEY of the sea? To sperm whales and orcas, yes. And they have discovered an incredibly easy way to get their favorite food in their bellies for free a la longline fishing gear.

Black cod is mostly fished by hook and line (HAL) gear off the Pacific Northwest and Alaska. Whales learned a charming new behavior of picking black cod off

longline gear in the North Pacific around 20 years ago, and since have come virtuosos in this skill. This is a big problem for the longline fleet, and no, I am not trying to be punny about the size of the whales themselves.

Whale depredation (the official term for the behavior of removing catch from the line) significantly reduces catch per unit effort (CPUE) for the fishermen and adds on costs from gear damage (hooks and ganglions are often ruined or lost when whales feed off the line). In a six-vessel-study conducted in 2011

is potentially a lot of fish (aka dollars) that fishermen are missing out on.

Some research groups, such as the Southeast Alaska Sperm Whale Avoidance Project (SEASWAP; I'd highly recommend looking up a YouTube video filmed by SEASWAP called "Sperm Whale Lunch Line") are looking at quantifying this problem to get a clearer idea of the scope of the issue, and researching solutions such as various deterrents and decoys. Unfortunately for fishermen, the whales are a little too smart for their own good. Fishermen think of these whales

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New Voices: Join the Chorus

Northwest Yachting is looking for fresh voices and welcoming solicitations! For this issue of *Nautical News*, we highlight a few new contributors who approached us and made the cut. If you're interested in joining the chorus, pitch yourself and your ideas to *Northwest Yachting's* managing editor, Norris Comer (norris@nwy-yachting.com), along with your resume.

and 2012 in the Western GOA (Gulf of Alaska) and BSAI (Bering Sea/Aleutian Island) regions, killer whales were costing vessels another \$980 per day, with nearly half of that going to fuel alone. However, it's difficult to quantify this issue and definitively say whether low catch rates were due to whale depredation or just poor fishing. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) estimates whale depredation to occur on 5 percent to 10 percent of HAL sets, but could be as high as 30 to 40 percent on an individual set of longline gear. That

with just about as much affection as Farmer Brown thought of Peter Rabbit. Or Chipotle would think of me if I tried to steal their guacamole.

The final solution has been to establish the new longline pot fishery. Longline pots are just what they sound like, a series of pots attached to a ground line. Whales would no longer be able to access the fish. Think of a bear barrel when you go camping. The critters can smell the food in there, but they just can't get to it.

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There are some added benefits as well. Pot fishing has a lower mortality rate than other gear types (though may cause more habitat damage than traditional HAL), so mortality of bycatch species of sablefish caused by longlining may decrease. Pot fishing could reduce the potential for strikes and entanglements with whales as well as birds. We could expect an increase in the black cod recruitment. If populations do increase, then fishermen's total allowable catch may be increased. This could increase quota-share values, increasing the profitability of the fishery, and ensuring a more reliable income and jobs for fishermen and the industry as a whole.

This solution is not a win-win, unfortunately. There are a handful of boats already fishing longline pots in Alaska, but this would open up the fishery to a wider fleet. Longline pot gear requires bigger hydraulic systems and more deck space, and could therefore prevent small vessels from being able to convert. The capital required to convert to this gear may also limit vessels and individuals. This gives an advantage to larger, better-capitalized vessels, and may shut out small, often family owned and operated vessels particularly in Southeast Alaska. This would cause fleet consolidation, and it could potentially destroy a way of life. Also, if some boats convert to longline pots, then the boats that are still fishing with traditional HAL gear may find that they have even more whales hanging around them, and may experience more concentrated and targeted depredation.

Despite these concerns, longline pots have been approved, and it is likely to open next year (2017) at the beginning of the Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) season. It will be interesting to see how this pans out. In the meantime, I'm going to start counting the change in the bottom of my purse. I guess there really is no such thing as a free lunch.

FYI

Docked Up

Docking tips from the other side of the line from dock hand Halee Hempfling.

By Halee Hempfling

After spending every summer on a boat from a very young age, I realized the sirens were calling to me and I got a summer job working as dock staff in these waters we call home. I've seen more than my fair share of mishaps and triumphs when it comes to boating, so here are a couple of those experiences that we or someone we know has all had.

Fenders are Friends

More times than I can count, I have had boats come in with no lines, no fenders, and look at me like it's my fault when their docking experience is less than pleasurable. Fenders are one of those boating accessories that you don't want to skimp on. There is a Goldilocks approach to them, you don't want them too big, or too small. And over or under inflated fenders are fairly useless when it comes to protecting your boat. A good gauge is being able to depress the fender approximately 1/4" with light pressure. Even if you are running solo, if you can put at least a mid-ship line up on the railing or gunnel, dock staff will find a way to grab it. I, and your insurance agent, beg of you, throw a fender or two out.

The slower you come in, the smaller the scratch

I've also had boats come in far more quickly than average. Not in an, "It's kind of windy, we are being pushed into the slip," way, but more like a Black-Friday-at-the-mall, cutthroat parking-lot adventure. In this particular scenario, the captain comes around the finger dock and hones in on the slip like a heat-seeking missile. His wife whips me in the face with the line scream-

ing, "Here, here, here!" frantically as she cruises by me on the bow. I push off the side of the boat and kick a fender in to avoid gouging the fiberglass as I grab the mid-ship and use it as a brake line to avoid the boat finding the end of the slip. The captain throws the boat in hard reverse and once the dock stops rolling and we secure all of the lines, he stuffs a few Canadian coins in my hand, which upon later inspection came out to a whopping \$2.50. Word to the wise: Optimum docking speed is just above idle depending on the conditions, which makes for a far less stressful situation. Also, fiberglass damage can be quite pricey, so helpful dock staff are a steal in comparison.

All lined up

It's often rare for any dock staff to tie up more than two lines on a boat, most captains take one of the lines, or throw an extra half hitch in for good measure. However, I had one boat that was different. The captain had a couple oddly placed cleats, making it difficult to get close to the dock. We chatted briefly, and when I requested one more line from the captain, he asked me if I could show him what I was doing. We spent ten minutes discussing placement and brought a line from the opposite stern cleat to help suck the boat in and make it easier to get onboard. We also discussed the value of a perfectly placed spring line to avoid any extra movement if the wind were to come up. That night I saw them at the local bar and we all toasted them learning something they had been too afraid to ask anyone while I had a drink with the nice tip they had given me. Cheers to that!

