

SAFETY FLYER TO THE FISHING INDUSTRY

Fatal man overboard from the lone-operated creel fishing vessel *Nista* (LK121) north of Belnahua, north-west Scotland on 13 December 2023



Nista

Narrative

On 13 December 2023, the skipper of the lone-operated creel fishing vessel *Nista* left South Cuan, isle of Luing, Scotland to fish to the north and west of the coast. The conditions in the area were a 2 knots (kts) to 4kts north-easterly wind with clear visibility and calm seas.

At about midday, *Nista*'s skipper was fishing in an area known as 'the buoys' to the north of Belnahua, north-west Scotland, and began to shoot a fleet of creels, steaming ahead at approximately 6kts. He became entangled in the back rope of the fleet and was pulled overboard through the open shooting gate. Immediately after this, five creels became jammed in the open shooting gate, preventing the remainder of the fleet from being shot away. At 1459, having continued to steam ahead, *Nista* grounded on the shoal to the north of Belnahua.

At about 1510, *Nista* was observed on the shoal and the skippers of two local vessels went to look for the skipper. On board they found the five creels stuck in the open shooting gate and, unable to find *Nista*'s skipper on the vessel, decided to raise the fleet. The skipper's body was recovered with his ankle entangled in the back rope. He had been pulled underwater and drowned.

The investigation could not determine why the skipper of *Nista* had become trapped in the back rope. If creels became tangled the skipper's usual approach would be to let them continue to deploy and then rehaul them to sort any tangles. However, the skipper had modified *Nista*'s stern by adding a cat catcher, which closed the top of the open shooting gate and increased the risk of a jam, stopping the creels from moving over the gunwale. Additionally, the open shooting gate was small with only enough room for two creels to pass at once side by side, and the working deck did not allow for segregation of the crew from creels and ropes.

Safety lessons

1. Single-handed fishing is not recommended. There was no one available to help *Nista's* lone skipper sort out any issues while shooting the creels or to recover him if he went overboard. Even if he had managed to untangle himself from the back rope, his chance of survival was minimal due to the vessel being underway and he had no means of raising the alarm from the water.
2. Many fishermen rely on managing creel gear fouls by shooting over the gunwale and then rehauling to sort it out, which the shooting gate arrangement on this vessel did not allow. This combined with a lack of space on the working deck to separate crew from ropes and creels increased the risk of being caught in the fishing gear and dragged overboard. Single-handed creel fishing remains a high-risk profession. A Seafish report on potting safety guidance noted that many overboard incidents from creel and potting vessels end in fatality; marine accident statistics for incidents involving UK registered fishing vessels in the 10 years before *Nista's* accident reflect this.
3. The lack of awareness within the fishing sector of Maritime and Coastguard Agency instructions and guidance for single-handed fishing vessels remains an ongoing concern that has yet to be addressed. It is the responsibility of lone skippers to understand the high level of risk involved in their fishing operations and to seek out the relevant guidance.

This flyer and the MAIB's investigation report are posted on our website: www.gov.uk/maib

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NOTE

This safety flyer is not written with litigation in mind and, pursuant to Regulation 14(14) of the Merchant Shipping (Accident Reporting and Investigation) Regulations 2012, shall be inadmissible in any judicial proceedings whose purpose, or one of whose purposes is to attribute or apportion liability or blame.

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