



Harbour porpoise bycatch management: why are we only discussing gillnets?

MMO are currently only looking to engage with the public regarding potential management options for gillnets to reduce bycatch of harbour porpoise. The reasons for this are outlined below.

Gillnets:

Bycatch from gillnets is over sustainable thresholds in the wider population areas (the North Sea and Celtic & Irish Seas Management Units) within which the Southern North Sea MPA and Bristol Channel Approaches MPA sit¹ (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Harbour porpoise management units (Inter-Agency Marine Mammal Working Group (IAMMWG), 2015) and English harbour porpoise MPAs

¹ [ICES 2021](#)



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MMO are looking for views on potential bycatch management options for gillnets because:

- Bycatch from gillnets is occurring in UK waters² and could be occurring within the MPAs³.
- UK Bycatch Annual Monitoring programme **estimated 703 porpoise caught by UK gillnets in 2020** (95% confidence: 416 to 1,338)².
- Gillnets are classed as **high risk** for porpoise bycatch by experts⁴.
- Gillnets are widely considered by experts to be the **main concern** for harbour porpoise bycatch globally⁵

Bottom towed gear:

Bycatch from single and twin bottom otter trawls is over sustainable thresholds in the wider population area (Celtic & Irish Sea) within which the Bristol Channel Approaches MPA sits¹ (Figure 1).

However, MMO are not looking for views on potential bycatch management options for bottom otter trawls at this time because:

- Porpoise bycatch in the wider population area is **likely from outside of UK waters**.
 - **Bay of Biscay is a known area of concern** – there are recurring problems of small cetacean bycatch in bottom otter trawls.
- **Limited porpoise bycatch observed using these gears in UK waters** – The UK Bycatch Annual Monitoring programme does not do dedicated sampling of bottom trawls (not high risk) but reports on non-dedicated programmes (e.g., fishery discard) from which zero porpoise were observed in bottom towed gears across the last five years 2016 to 2020²
- Bottom trawls are classed as **low risk** for porpoise bycatch by experts⁴, with bycatch not occurring at a large scale in non-gillnet UK fisheries⁶

² [Annual UK Bycatch Monitoring Programme reports](#)

³ [Coram and Northridge 2018](#)

⁴ [ICES 2019](#)

⁵ [Brownell Jr et al 2019](#) and [Read et al 2006](#)

⁶ [IAMMWG 2015](#)



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Why could bycatch in bottom otter trawls be from outside UK waters?

- Sustainable thresholds of bycatch are calculated at an Assessment Unit level (Figure 2) but for the MPA, conservation advice focuses on the Management Unit level (Figure 1).
- The assessment unit for the Celtic and Irish Seas extends into the Bay of Biscay, where small cetacean bycatch is a recurring problem in bottom otter trawls⁷ due to high fishing effort (Figure 2) and possibly due to gear having high vertical openings⁸
- Current mitigation in the Bay of Biscay: temporary month-long closures (2024 & 2025) to vessels over 8 m and compulsory acoustic deterrents on pelagic and demersal twin trawls⁹.
- Preliminary analysis shows the measures in 2024 may have reduced common dolphin strandings¹⁰.
- Bycatch in this area is therefore included in threshold calculations for the Management Unit though is **unlikely to be occurring in UK waters**.

⁷ [ICES 2023](#)

⁸ [ICES 2020](#)

⁹ [EU Commission 2024](#)

¹⁰ [EU Commission 2024](#)



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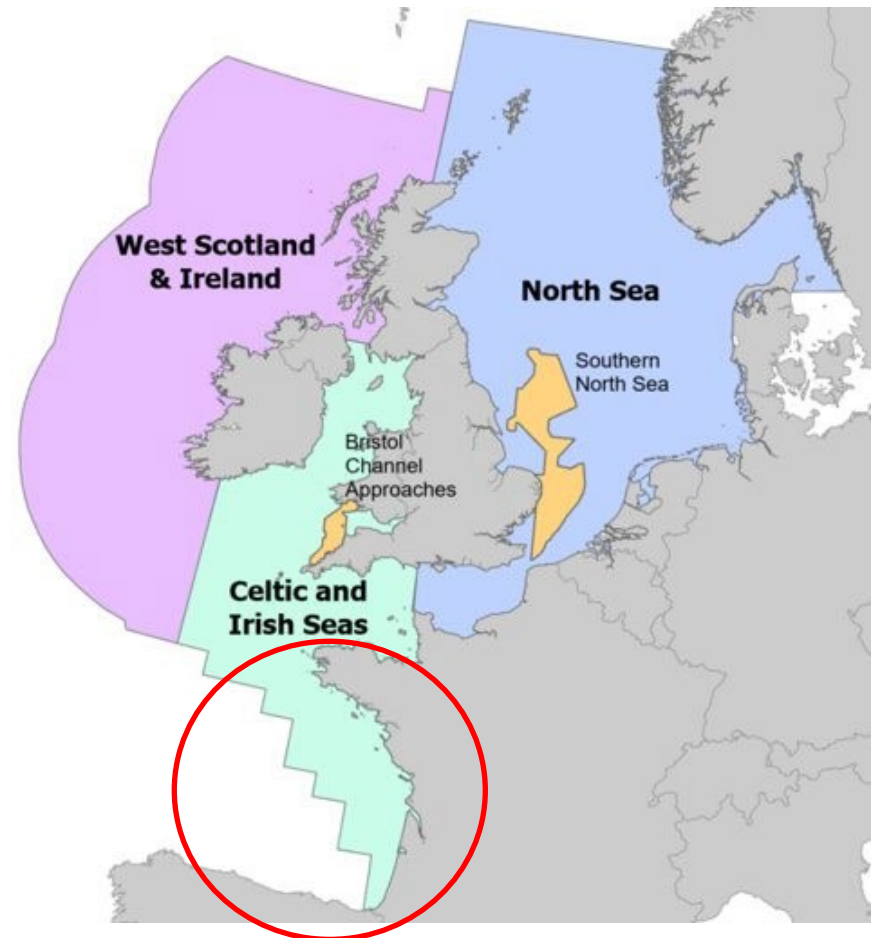
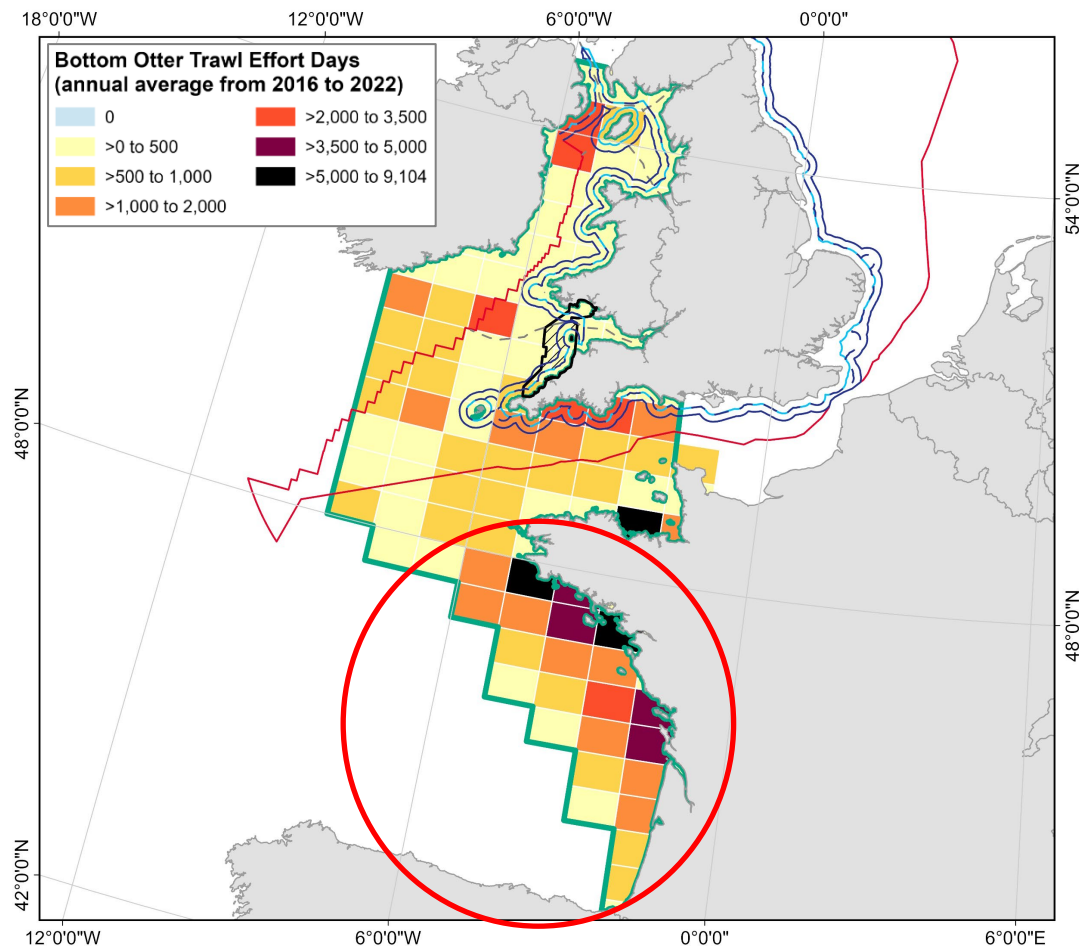


Figure 2: (left) annual average effort days by single and twin bottom otter trawls (including vessels of all lengths) per ICES statistical rectangle in the Celtic and Irish Seas Assessment Unit; (right) harbour porpoise assessment units (OSPAR, 2022), Bay of Biscay highlighted by red circles.