



SUMMARY REPORT

Key Welfare Recommendations for Marine Capture Fisheries

The following is a summary of our [full report](#) on *Key Welfare Recommendations for Marine Capture Fisheries*, primarily addressed to fisheries management professionals and other relevant decision-makers in the fisheries industry. It is our objective to show that animal welfare issues in commercial fisheries are widespread and significant, and that the adoption of an animal welfare-based approach (WBA) to capture fisheries management is urgently needed.

An animal WBA gives equal weighting to both the welfare of target animals and the welfare of other animals indirectly affected by fishing activities (via bycatch and ghost gear). Under standard fisheries management regimes, such issues are typically disregarded or grouped under 'conservation categories' that are rarely resolved. However, under an animal welfare approach, the key 'parameter' is welfare.

This report breaks down welfare concerns in capture fisheries into five key pillars: 1) capture and retrieval; 2) onboard handling; 3) stunning & slaughter; 4) bycatch; and 5) abandoned fishing gear. While key recommendations are presented under each of the pillars, further funding, research, training and technological tools are needed in order to fill the immense knowledge gap regarding what constitutes humane capture fisheries. As indicated in each of the priority areas below, it is imperative to include measures that can reduce the suffering of wild-caught aquatic animals within the broader discussion on sustainable fisheries.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the high degree of suffering that aquatic animals encounter with all types of fishing gear, this report focuses on phases of the fishing process, instead of breaking it down by gear type.

1. Capture and Retrieval

Each fishing gear and capture method can inflict its own form of suffering on the target and non-target species, depending on how it is operated. Key points of low welfare during capture include exhaustion from attempting to escape fishing gear, injury caused by capture in fishing gear, and, high levels of stress induced by the capture process. Main interventions for Capture include:

- Intervention 1.1: The duration of capture should be reduced.
- Intervention 1.2: The size of each haul should be decreased.
- Intervention 1.3: Gear that is deployed should be species- and ecosystem-specific.
- Intervention 1.4: The use of live bait should be phased out.

The retrieval phase of the capture process, during which aquatic animals are hauled on board, causes significant suffering and injury to the animals in question. Main interventions for Retrieval include:

- Intervention 1.5: Fish should be retrieved carefully (e.g., limit depth of catch, pump fish onboard, surface animals slowly to avoid barotrauma).
- Intervention 1.6: Use descending devices for discarded deep-water animals.
- Intervention 1.7: Gaffing is a painful method of landing fish and should be banned.



2. Onboard Handling

Onboard handling, which is the time after retrieval and before slaughter, can be highly stressful for the captured animals. Stressors include inappropriate handling, mutilation (e.g., body parts removed), and prolonged exposure to air and heat. Main interventions include:

- **Intervention 2.1:** Time spent out of water before slaughter should be minimized.
- **Intervention 2.2:** The removal of, or intentional damage to, animal body parts should be prohibited.
- **Intervention 2.3:** Captured animals should be stored in species-appropriate holding spaces.

3. Stunning & Slaughter

The majority of wild-captured aquatic animals die either from suffocation in air (asphyxiation) or are frozen to death in ice water. The rest are either gutted alive, or are decapitated without prior stunning. While several humane methods of slaughter exist, they are rarely applied in wild capture fisheries. Key interventions include:

- **Intervention 3.1:** Stun aquatic animals before slaughter.
- **Intervention 3.2:** The use of salt-baths and asphyxiation in ice slurries should be banned.
- **Intervention 3.3:** Invertebrates should not be slaughtered using decapitation.



4. Incidental Catch of Non-target Species (Bycatch)

The suffering inflicted on non-target animals is a major issue in capture fisheries. A wide range of animals, including elasmobranchs (skates, sharks and rays), marine mammals, turtles and seabirds — many of which are endangered — forage in highly productive areas of the ocean, and thus are often inadvertently caught in fishing gear. In some cases, these animals are released back into the sea; however, post-release mortality rates are typically very high. Main interventions include:

- **Intervention 4.1:** Modify fishing gear to improve selectivity, and reduce bycatch at the source.
- **Intervention 4.2:** Spatial or temporal restrictions in fishing zones where rates of bycatch are high.

5. Abandoned Fishing Gear

As with the issue of bycatch, the impact of abandoned, lost and otherwise discarded fishing gear (or, 'ghost gear') can lead to significant suffering of aquatic animals. This is costly to the industry as well, since an estimated 90 percent of species caught in ghost gear are of commercial value. As a baseline on ghost gear reduction, we support the recommendations listed in the report commissioned by the FAO/UNEP, as well as the Global Ghost Gear Initiative's Best Practice Framework for the Management of Fishing Gear for additional useful measures. Other main interventions include:

- **Intervention 5.1:** Fishing vessels should carry the necessary equipment to recover lost fishing gear.
- **Intervention 5.2:** Prioritize the commercial adoption of durable gear components that incorporate biodegradable elements.
- **Intervention 5.3:** Implement a reporting system to routinely record gear losses.



ADDITIONAL CONCERNS

Beyond the five key considerations of animal welfare in marine capture fisheries outlined above, we have identified six additional areas that have the potential to improve the welfare of animals affected by capture fisheries.

- 1. Welfare indicators & adequate training:** Training in careful capture, handling and slaughter techniques should be mandatory for all personnel involved in fishing activities.
- 2. Monitoring, control and surveillance (MCS):** Mandate technology or other methods onboard for continuous monitoring and enforcement of sustainable and humane capture fisheries activities at sea.
- 3. Overfishing:** Apply an animal WBA in the revision of current policies, standards, and guidelines with an eye to reducing overfishing.
- 4. Human rights:** Fishers who are mistreated and subject to inhumane conditions onboard are unlikely to consider animal welfare. All states should ratify the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention No. 188 and adopt it in their national legislation.
- 5. Transparency and traceability:** Amend sourcing policies to require data on capture methods, animal welfare training, electronic monitoring onboard and independent audits.
- 6. Artisanal Fisheries:** Follow the FAO's [Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries](#) as a baseline for improving the sustainability of small-scale fisheries as well as adopt the aforementioned interventions for commercial fisheries wherever possible.



CONCLUSION

Wild capture fisheries is the last major food-producing sector that does not take animal welfare into consideration. Currently, careful handling is only practiced in high-value fisheries where animals are retrieved individually, and where product quality is crucial. However, this approach should be replicated across all fishing gears and methods. We call for the adoption of an animal welfare-based approach to fisheries management, and the implementation of the interventions listed in this report. The need for animal welfare considerations in fisheries should also be reflected in legislation.

We recognize the existing knowledge gap around what constitutes good welfare in capture fisheries. Therefore, in order to accelerate the adoption of humane capture and slaughter techniques in fisheries, we call for more research and financial support by all relevant stakeholders. Such research should focus on developing 'welfare-minded' fishing gear, refining current soak times and retrieval rates, scaling up humane stunning and slaughter onboard, and limiting the capture of non-target species. The road towards sustainable and humane capture fisheries is a win-win solution all-round.

Please refer to our [full report](#) for more information and additional recommendations.

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