



FIXED-NET ACTIVITY MONITORING

Old Colwyn

A record of monitoring in Old Colwyn for
fixed-net activity between August 2024
and May 2026

Sea Watch Foundation

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Fixed-net activity monitoring Old Colwyn 2024 - 2026

In the UK, the most abundant and widely distributed cetacean is the harbour porpoise (Evans & Waggitt, 2020; Waggitt et al., 2020; Gilles et al. 2023). This is certainly also true of north Wales, where harbour porpoise sightings are the most frequently recorded (Evans & Waggitt, 2023). Because harbour porpoise are more abundant and venture closer inshore than most other cetaceans, harbour porpoise strandings are also reported in greater frequency than other species. Stranding data from the UK Cetacean Strandings Investigation Programme (CSIP) indicate that harbour porpoises account for the majority of strandings in the UK.

According to a 2019 Natural Resources Wales report, from a total number of 4329 harbour porpoise strandings recorded from 1992 to 2017 the highest density of strandings was reported on the Welsh coastline, accounting for 46% of the total number of harbour porpoise strandings. There are many factors that may lead a cetacean to strand such as noise, pollution, reduced food sources, bottlenose dolphin attack, navigational errors or getting trapped in gill-nets leading to suffocation and death. There is no doubt that bycatch is one of the biggest threats to harbour porpoise with high evidence of risk from set gill nets (Evans et al., 2021). In 2021, an estimated 1229 harbour porpoise were bycaught in UK net fisheries¹ (Kingston et al, 2024). A significant threat is that the feeding behaviour of the harbour porpoise on or near the seabed increases the possibility of interaction with bottom set nets such as fixed entangling nets (Bjørge, 2003; Evans and Hintner, 2012). There also appears to be a bias towards higher numbers of inexperienced juveniles becoming entangled in nets with riskier foraging behaviour exhibited near gill nets.

Accidental bycatch in gill nets doesn't always lead to death. Some of the injuries sustained through bycatch include internal and external injuries, long-term health issues, physical and psychological stress and reduced life expectancy. Current levels of bycatch in the UK are considered to be unsustainable (Marine Management Organisation, 2025).

The recent surveys in Irish waters, particularly in the Irish Sea, has shown a significant decline in the species (see Giralt Paradell et al. 2024, 2025; Goh et al., 2024, 2025).

Harbour porpoise are protected under national and international legislation and have also been designated as a species feature in several Welsh Special Areas of Conservation (SACs). This report is primarily in response to the 2024 stranding event of two harbour porpoise in Old Colwyn, North East Wales, thought to be due to bycatch in fixed shore-nets.

Report Summary:

Following the stranding of two harbour porpoise alongside fixed shore-based netting in Old Colwyn, the Sea Watch Foundation began monitoring the area for signs of shore-based netting and bycatch. The netting considered responsible for the harbour porpoise deaths in 2024 had floats attached. The floats identified the net owner as Sea Marine. Other bycatch within the nets on the same date included cormorants.

Between August 2024 and December 2025, netting was recorded along the beach at Old Colwyn. During this period, there were also occasional reports of dead fish littering the beaches, such as dogfish (smoothhounds), for which shore-based netting was deemed responsible. This has caused some conflict between net owners and local residents, with some threatening to remove the nets. By March 2026, the nets had disappeared from the beach and have not been reported since.

¹ bycaught in UK net fisheries where no acoustic deterrent devices were fitted

1. Human conflicts

Prior to the harbour porpoise strandings in 2024, social media users posted concerns about the gill nets placed along the beach at Old Colwyn. These were countered by other posts that pointed out that removing or destroying the nets could lead to action for criminal damage.



Old Colwyn Facebook post December 2023 showing netting by the Fishing Pier

In July 2024 (a month prior to the strandings), a social media user asked about the gill-nets strung across the beach which he said had 'lots of wildlife trapped in it'.

In response, some users referenced dogfish caught in the nets, along with crustaceans. Again, some posted about the illegality of cutting up the nets.

2. Sea Watch Foundation - Recording

04 August 2024 – a harbour porpoise mother and calf was recorded as part of the Sea Watch Foundation's National Whale and Dolphin Watch (starting 09:35 as the tide came in).



Netting visible 04/08/2024 (Credit R. Bointon)



04/08/2024 The nets attracted birds, including gulls and cormorants (Credit R. Bointon)



04/08/2024 Recorded by the Regional Coordinator, the mother was identifiable by the distinctive notch in the dorsal fin. The smaller dorsal fin of the calf can be seen alongside the mother (Credit R. Bointon)



The fishing pier at Old Colwyn is a good vantage point (Credit R. Bointon)



Harbour porpoise mother and calf foraging around the groyne marker as photographed from the fishing pier. Birds can be seen gathering around the in-shore nets (Credit R. Bointon)

Concerns

During the Watch, we were approached by a resident who expressed concern about the nets and the potential danger to the harbour porpoises and other marine life, including cormorants. He said that he'd reported the netting to the appropriate authorities.

3. Stranding – W3W: picturing.scores.rubble

19th August 2024 – reports were posted on local social media of a harbour porpoise mother and calf stranded dead, quickly followed by local media reports.

The notch on the mother's dorsal fin identified this pair as the harbour porpoises recorded on 04/08/2024



The mother's notched dorsal fin was recognisable

British Divers Marine Life Rescue were notified that two dead porpoise had been removed from the netting and visited the scene to find them both deceased with netting nearby. Eleanor Falch, Operations Manager from the Sea Watch Foundation, was also present.



Mother and calf with netting (E. Falch)

There was some discussion about whether the net had come adrift in the water but, in the following photograph, it appears to be anchored into the sand.



Net appears to be anchored into the sand (E.Falch)

Further photographs show the net apparently anchored into the sand.



Anchored points of the netting. (Credit E. Falch)



Netting showing floats (Credit E. Falch)

Other bycatch within the netting is shown below:



Cormorants were another casualty of the nets (Credit E. Falch)



Credit E. Falch



Credit E. Falch

The floats tied to the netting were labelled **Sea Marine**.



Bottle used as a float identifying the owner (Credit E. Falch)



Credit E. Falch



Credit E. Falch



Steps down to area of beach where gill netting was placed at w3w: picturing.scores.rubble (Credit E. Falch)



Net stretched across beach (Credit E. Falch)

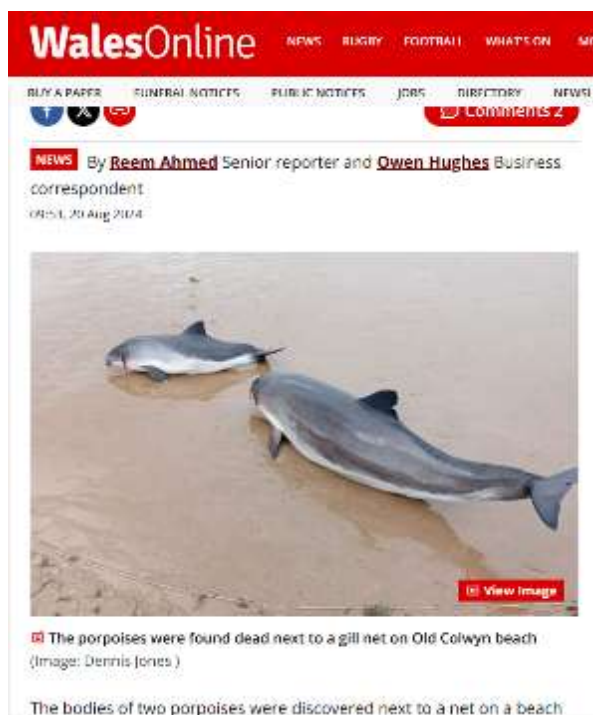
Necropsy

The Marine Environmental Monitoring team retrieved the animals for post-mortem (necropsy). A post on a local Facebook page indicated that MEM would be working closely with NRW and the Welsh Government for appropriate ways to prevent this happening again. The review of the practice of shore-based netting in Wales (December 2024) states that the interim post-mortem

found evidence of marks on the porpoises' bodies consistent with entanglement in monofilament gear. To note, these are interim reports pending official sign off and agreed cause of death by a vet.

Media reports

Local media picked up on the story with Wales Online attributing the deaths to the fishing net which had also washed up with the harbour porpoise pair.



Local media reported the deaths, attributed to the fishing nets

In **September 2025**, local media picked up on residents' concerns about gill-netting and dead fish on the beaches.



Media reports September 2025 – North Wales Live

Extract:

“People were left horrified when coming across numerous dead sharks on a beach in Conwy county. One person counted six, another totted up 10 along a short stretch of [Rhôs on Sea](#) beach. They were identified as dog sharks, commonly called smoothhounds.

Line nets erected off-shore were blamed for their demise and furious residents considered wading out to cut them down.

After receiving allegations of illegal fishing, the Welsh Government’s fisheries team investigated – but the nets had been removed by the time marine enforcement officers arrived. The team said “no nets were present on arrival” and so they could find no evidence of bylaw breaches.

A spokesperson said: “Based on the evidence available, there is nothing to indicate that any illegal fishing has occurred. Our marine enforcement officers will continue to monitor the area.

Other reports from Wales Online indicated that this was unwanted bycatch:

WalesOnline NEWS RUGBY FOOTBALL WHAT'S ON MOBILE

BUY A PAPER FUNERAL NOTICES PUBLIC NOTICES JOBS ADVERTISE WITH US NEWS

[W](#) > [News](#) > [Latest Wales News](#) > [Beaches](#)

Mystery as six dead sharks found stranded on Welsh beach

Welsh Government enforcement officers were called to investigate after the sharks were found



Comments 9

NEWS By **Andrew Forgrave** Countryside and tourism editor and **Elle Gosley** Reporter

13:50, 21 Sep 2025



[View 2 images](#)

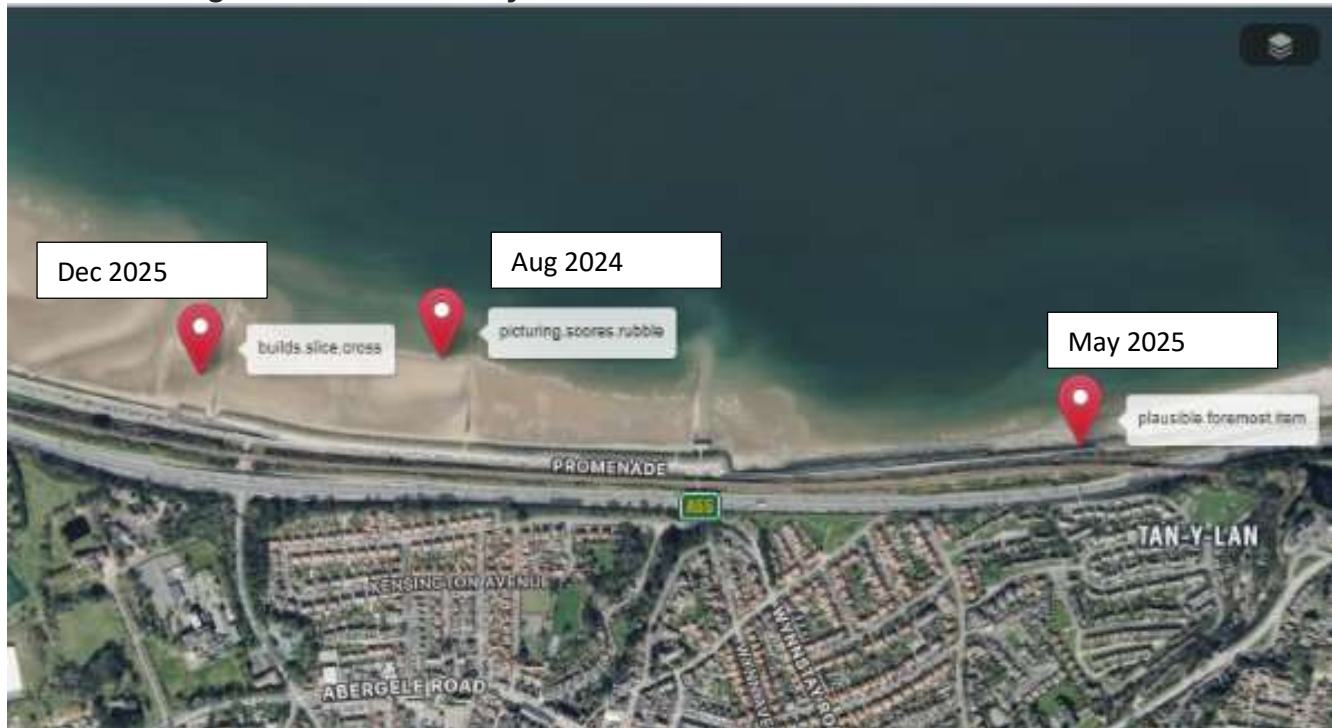
Local people complained the sharks had been 'dumped' on the beach as an unwanted bycatch (Image: Jane Wynne)

Beachgoers were left shocked after discovering numerous dead sharks scattered along a beach in **Conwy** county. One individual counted six while another tallied up 10 along a short section of Rhos on Sea beach.

4. Monitoring

Nearest address and post code: Promenade, Old Colwyn, Conwy, Wales, LL29 9TA. W3W: picturing.scores.rubble. Grid Ref: SH865788

Locations of gill nets at old Colwyn



[15 May 2025](#): W3W: plausible.foremost.item.

Netting was placed across the beach at grid reference: SH875787. Some fish had been caught in the netting. There were no floats/markers on the netting for identification.

During observation, a family approached to express their concern that the nets may harm marine life.



Dead fish in netting. Credit E. Falch



Netting shown across the beach (credit E. Falch)

05 December 2025. W3W: builds.slice.cross

Monitoring up to December continued to show presence of netting in Old Colwyn. In this photograph from December, a person can be seen removing the net (uncertain whether this was the net owner). The floats appeared to be old milk bottles but the observer was not sufficiently close to read any identifying markings (if present).



Credit E. Falch

2026

In February, there were social media reports of a deceased harbour porpoise at Colwyn Bay but cause of death is unknown. In March 2026 no netting was seen to be present along the Old Colwyn beach. However the presence of sand bags with fairly new looking ropes attached was noted in the same location of previous netting (these may have been left behind rather than indicators of new activity).

Whether this is because local residents have removed the nets or because the net owner has decided to move it elsewhere is uncertain.

What is certain is that the presence of netting along this stretch of coast has caused a furore over the past few years and resulted in the sad deaths of two healthy harbour porpoise.

A further check in May 2026 did not detect any netting activity.

5. Conclusion

The use of shore-based nets at Old Colwyn has caused a great deal of concern about bycatch and marine mammal welfare. It has also caused conflict between local residents and fishermen. One aspect of this is the confusion surrounding the legalities of shore-based netting and the potential implications of unauthorised net removal or damage.

The fixed shore-based net which was considered responsible for the demise of two harbour porpoises in August 2024, was labelled Sea Marine with no other identifiable marks. However, further netting monitored up to May 2025 was not labelled with the owner's name or mark. It was not possible to identify any markings/names on the net that was removed from the beach in December 2025.

Harbour porpoise is a protected species and, although this stretch of beach does not have protected designation, these marine mammals are an important component of the Welsh marine environment. Both of the stranded animals were healthy with no signs of disease or ill-health. They had previously been recorded foraging two weeks previous to the entanglement as part of the Sea Watch Foundation's National Whale and Dolphin Watch.

The review of the practice of shore-based netting in Wales (December 2024) states that the interim post-mortem found evidence of marks on the porpoises' bodies consistent with entanglement in monofilament gear. To note, these are interim reports pending official sign off and agreed cause of death by a vet.

Breath-holding marine mammals have developed unique adaptations to enable them to dive for food prey. Strenuous activity, resulting from panic and distress when caught in gill-netting, creates metabolic demand which eventually exceeds these physiological adaptations to diving.

When an entangled cetacean is unable to reach the surface, the blowhole remains closed and acute hypoxia sets in leading to suffocation, rather than drowning. It remains to be seen from the necropsy results whether ocular bleeding was due to scavenger damage or was a result of asphyxiation.

Evidence points to fixed shore-based netting being the major contributor in the deaths of the otherwise healthy harbour porpoise mother and calf. Other casualties of the net included seabirds.

There is an urgent need for regular shore-based monitoring and reporting along this stretch of coastline. However, reporting alone will be ineffectual unless measures are implemented to restrict shore-based netting in areas of high cetacean activity, particularly for cetaceans that venture close in-shore or are likely to interact with netting.

Proposals:

- Ensure that all shore-based fishermen are registered with an appropriate authority.
- Implement a permitting system for shore-based nets that better controls the bycatch of migratory fish.
- Provide clear guidelines for shore-based net users, e.g.:
 - the use of identifiable marks or other clear ID features on nets
 - regular checks and clearing nets
 - instructions on sufficiently weighting nets to sink below the surface during high tides to avoid entangling surface-diving seabirds

- ensuring mesh size, twine diameter, net height and water depth are understood to be significant factors affecting bycatch – e.g. some studies have demonstrated greater bycatch of harbour porpoise with increases in mesh size in fixed net fisheries.
- Monitor shore-based netting and bycatch, working with local organisations and sharing findings.
- Clarify shore-based netting requirements and restrictions.
- Consider use of acoustic deterrents in areas of cetacean activity (although these are usually associated with offshore commercial gillnets, they can be attached to any static fixed net). Pingers are very effective at deterring harbour porpoise from the proximity of fishing nets. However, it should also be noted that, depending on the number of pingers used, their extent and frequency of installation along the net, they also have the potential to exclude harbour porpoise from important foraging areas for extended periods of time (Van Beest et al. 2017). An estimated number of harbour porpoises bycaught in UK net fisheries 2021 where acoustic deterrent devices were used was 865, compared to 1229 bycaught in nets without acoustic deterrent devices fitted (Kingston et al, 2024).

There's no doubt that the incident in Old Colwyn will not be the last we hear of entanglement with shore-based netting. Another high-profile case covered by the BBC (2025) reported a pregnant harbour porpoise caught in netting in Cornwall. Without proper controls or deterrents in place, shore-based netting will continue to pose a very real threat to cetaceans such as harbour porpoise.

6. Correspondence

In September 2025, an email was sent to Natural Resources Wales outlining concerns about the gill netting and asking about the legality of this in terms of harbour porpoise bycatch and local byelaws.

NRW response below:

September 2025 – reply from NRW: Having spoken to a number of colleagues, our view is that you should raise these matters with Welsh Government as they are responsible for implementing and enforcing byelaws relating to shore netting in Wales as well as whether further restrictions will be enacted in the future. We would suggest you contact Welsh Government Marine Fisheries using the following email address: Fisheries-intel@gov.wales (including any concerns you may have relating to possible illegal fishing). We note your reference to - Shore Based Netting [Review of the practice of shore-based netting in Wales](#) (December 2024). The following documents may also be of interest (if you have not already seen them): [Call for Evidence: Shore-based Netting in Wales](#) (January 2025) and the summary of responses [Call for evidence: shore-based netting in Wales Summary of Responses](#) which has just been published.

NRW submitted evidence to Welsh Government concerning the risk of bycatch interactions with shore set nets in 2024 (salmonids) and 2025 (other marine protected species). Both sets of evidence have been published in these documents.

In response to this, the following email was sent to fisheries.intel@gov.wales:

September 2025 – email to Fisheries.Intel@gov.wales: Local newspaper and eye-witness reports have recently highlighted dead bodies of dogfish littering the beach in Old Colwyn/Rhos-on-Sea, most likely the result of shore-netting. Apparently, the netting was reported but had been removed by the time that the Wales Government fisheries team arrived. I understand that byelaws may be restricted geographically and that the byelaws relating to shore netting which affect other parts of North Wales, i.e. around the Conwy area, may not be applicable to Rhos-on-Sea. The recent newspaper reports certainly indicate that there is no byelaw and therefore no protection in Rhos-on-Sea.

I have read the [Review of the practice of shore-based netting in Wales](#) (December 2024) and can see that shore netting in Rhos-on-Sea was noted as part of the review, under **Other species susceptible to bycatch**.

As Regional Coordinator for the Sea Watch Foundation for Flintshire, Denbighshire and Conwy, I have over the years recorded both harbour porpoise and bottlenose dolphins foraging and travelling along the bay at Old Colwyn/Rhos-on-Sea. The 2024 review references the bycatch of two harbour porpoise in August 2024 - a mother and calf which I'd recorded and photographed only a couple of weeks earlier as part of the Sea Watch Foundation's National Whale and Dolphin Watch. The mother was recognisable by the distinctive notch in her dorsal fin. Both mother and calf appeared healthy. After watching them for over an hour happily foraging, it was a crying shame to read reports of their deaths as a result of shore netting. The interim necropsy report indicated injuries consistent with entanglement with netting. In cases of entanglement it is often asphyxiation that is the main cause of death. This was a very sad outcome for two healthy cetaceans who would most likely have had many years of life before them. Not only is this a very sad outcome but the demise of a protected animal should be of great concern from a larger conservation viewpoint. On the day of the Watch, one local resident stopped to talk to me about the seabirds which were attracted to the shore netting and told me that, out of concern for seabirds (mainly cormorants) and cetaceans, he had reported the netting to the appropriate authorities. Being aware of the threat to the lives of the mother and calf makes their deaths so much more tragic.

Earlier this year there was a call for evidence ([Call for Evidence: Shore-based Netting in Wales](#)) regarding shore-based netting. In the summary of responses to the call to evidence ([Call for Evidence: Shore-based Netting in Wales Summary of Responses](#)), the answer to Q15 references dogfish (28%) and smooth-hounds (14%) as the type of bycatch encountered. The dead bodies of dogfish littering the beaches at Rhos-on-Sea suggests that these are frequent casualties of shore netting. I witnessed this first-hand when I went out to Leasowe to collect and safely discard netting that had trapped a (deceased) porpoise. There were also many crustaceans (some still alive) and also dead dogfish trapped in the netting. Harbour porpoise is not listed in the responses to Q15 but these are at very real risk of bycatch in shore netting as we have sadly seen at Rhos-on-Sea. However, it was also heartening that 100% of respondents stated that they would engage in scientific research regarding bycatch.

So that I can better advise anyone who is concerned about shore netting at Rhos-on-Sea, please could you answer the following questions:

Is shore netting along this stretch of beach restricted under any of the byelaws pertaining to Wales and, if not, why?

Should the presence of shore netting be reported if seen at Rhos-on-Sea (with bycatch, including harbour porpoise, in mind)?

Is better protection for this particular stretch of beach in Rhos-on-Sea, in relation to the threat from bycatch, likely to be forthcoming in the near future?

Response from Shore-based Fisheries:

September 2025 – reply from Shore-based Fisheries: Thank you for your email dated 23 September 2025.

Please find below our response to the questions you raised:

Is shore netting along this stretch of beach restricted under any of the byelaws pertaining to Wales and, if not, why?

Shore-based netting along this stretch of beach is not restricted under current inshore fisheries legislation. The relevant byelaws, many of which date back several decades, were primarily established to prevent bycatch of salmonid species such as salmon and sea trout. As a result, restrictions are largely focused on spatial and seasonal protections near river mouths and estuaries, where interactions with these species are most likely. More recent conservation measures, including the designation of harbour porpoise as a species feature in several Welsh Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), have been a key factor in prompting the review of shore-based netting practices.

Should the presence of shore netting be reported if seen at Rhos-on-Sea (with bycatch, including harbour porpoise, in mind)?

We would appreciate any information regarding shore-netting activity in this area. Insights into the number of individuals involved, how frequently netting occurs, the number of nets used, and any bycatch observed would be especially valuable.

Is better protection for this particular stretch of beach in Rhos-on-Sea, in relation to the threat from bycatch, likely to be forthcoming in the near future?

We are currently undertaking a comprehensive review of the data collected through the call for evidence on shore-based netting in Wales. Alongside this, we are working with the Wales Sea Bass Advisory Group to explore the potential for introducing a voluntary catch recording system and advancing scientific research into bycatch and discards. These additional, longer-term data gathering exercises will strengthen the evidence base, inform policy development, and will help to determine whether additional measures are needed to improve the regulation of shore-based netting in Wales.

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