

Hebridean Whale & Dolphin Trust

research education conservation

28 Main Street
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Statement from HWDT on proposed aquaculture development off North Gometra, Loch Tuath, Mull.

The waters around the central west coast of Mull are an area of high biodiversity, and an important habitat for cetaceans. The area has been shown to host harbour porpoises (Booth, 2010), minke whales (Leaper et al., 1997; Macleod et al., 2004), bottlenose dolphins and non-cetacean species such as basking sharks are also frequently reported in the area (HWDT, unpublished data).

The proposed aquaculture development will be sited within the natural range and foraging areas of grey and common seals. A grey seal Special Area of Conservation (SAC) is situated adjacent to the area (Treshnish Isles SAC) which hosts 3% of the UK and 2.8% of the EU populations of the species. Additionally, there are numerous common seal haul out sites in the immediate vicinity of the proposed site. It is likely that, as for most Scottish fish farms, it will attract the attention of at least some of these seals, and operators may consider it necessary to use a range of anti-predator measures in response to the risk of seal predation. Of these measures, HWDT is particularly concerned about any use of Acoustic Deterrent Devices (ADDs). In the Screening Scoping document for the development of this site Scottish Salmon Company state that "Acoustic deterrent devices have(s) been identified as necessary for this site". HWDT believe that the use of ADDs in an attempt to deter seals will lead to the disturbance and exclusion of cetaceans which use the surrounding habitat.

Cetaceans use sound to communicate, navigate, orientate and find food; they have a highly developed and sensitive sense of hearing, and as such are vulnerable to the impacts of anthropogenic noise in their environment.

Studies of the effect of ADD use on harbour porpoises (Johnston, 2002; Olesiuk et al., 2002) have shown that ADDs, which produce sound that can be very loud and spread over long distances, can displace porpoises from important habitats over large ranges. For example, Booth (2010) found that in 2008, after the installation of new ADD devices in the Sound of Mull, acoustic detections of porpoises decreased over the region as a whole and no acoustic detections of harbour porpoises were made within 4.3 km of the site.

The Habitats Regulations 1994 (as amended in Scotland) provide protection for European protected species (those species listed on Annex IV of the Habitats Directive), which is that it is an offence to deliberately or recklessly disturb cetaceans. As a potential source of disturbance to cetaceans, the use of ADDs on aquaculture sites needs to be carefully assessed. It is likely that the development of aquaculture sites in areas of important cetacean habitat will have substantial negative impacts if ADDs are used.

HWDT encourage the investigation into cage designs which are robust enough to exclude seals and to withstand the environmental conditions present in exposed areas. This would make ADD use unnecessary, and be of benefit both to cetacean and seal populations in the area.

HWDT, January 2012

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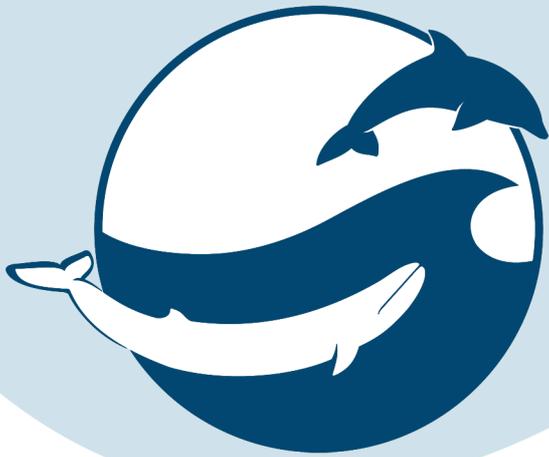
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