

UK - Vessel Collisions

The significance of these events has become much greater in recent years with the development of larger and faster vessels using waters inhabited by declining cetacean populations.

However, whale mortality from ship collisions is still underreported (Félix and Van Waerebeek, 2005).

Whale-watching vessels have caused several cetacean mortalities through collisions (Weinrich, 2005) and can be a particular threat as they target areas of high cetacean abundance. The trend for larger and faster vessels is of particular concern as this is likely to reduce the amount of time for operators (and cetaceans) to take evasive action when necessary. The impact of the collision will also be greater for faster and larger vessels and it has been suggested that speeds over 13knots are more likely to result in fatal collisions with cetaceans (Laist et al, 2001). Concerns over the in the number of whale-watching boats in the UK led to suggestions that speed restrictions (of 10knots or less) be imposed in known areas of high whale abundance (Parsons and Gaillard, 2003).

However, to date, there are few conclusive reports of large cetaceans being killed in UK waters as a result of collisions with marine traffic. In 2005, a minke whale calf was reported to have been struck by a small speedboat near Portsoy, Scotland and a high-speed ferry was involved in a collision with what may have been a whale off the Holyhead coast, Wales in 2006. The outcome of these collisions remains unknown.

Small cetaceans are susceptible to collisions with vessels in increasingly busy coastal waters. The increase in solitary, sociable dolphins (predominantly bottlenose dolphins) serves to amplify this risk. Several small cetaceans have been observed with badly damaged dorsal fins that may be attributable to propeller damage (Shrimpton and Parsons, 2000). Jet, a friendly bottlenose dolphin around the coasts of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, UK, was also killed following a collision with a tug-boat propeller during the previous month.

Dave, another solitary bottlenose dolphin off the Kent coast, UK, had a significant part of her tail cut off, in what was almost certainly a collision with a boat propeller in October 2007. Georges or Randy, the solitary bottlenose, typically found either off the southern British or northern French coasts, has a distinctive dorsal fin bearing scars from a propeller wound. Jean Floc'h is a solitary bottlenose dolphin which lives primarily on the French Brittany coast, and

has developed a particular fondness for boat oars and propellers, thus increasing the likelihood of a collision.

A number of whale and dolphin watching codes of conduct exist for areas around the UK, with the intention of promoting responsible wildlife watching and reducing collisions with cetaceans and boats. However, these are voluntary codes and, as such, cannot be enforced.