



Operation COAST - LINE



REDUCING THE IMPACT OF ACTIVE FISHERS ON WILDLIFE

THE ISSUE:

The impact of fishing on wildlife has been evident since the first line was cast. Shorebirds and seabirds are being hooked and tangled on coastlines and in estuaries around the country, often with fatal consequences.

Until now, all the injuries were attributed to discarded fishing tackle, with almost every relevant agency, wildlife group and environmental organisation promoting awareness campaigns targeted at discarded line.



Over the last 14 years, Australian Seabird Rescue teams have rescued thousands of birds suffering from fishing tackle injuries. During that time, ASR studies revealed that discarded line was not the main cause of interaction between fishers and wildlife. Hundreds of images of injured birds were analysed, the vast majority of which, indicated that discarded line could not have caused the injuries.

For instance, how could a hook embed in the head or neck of a bird – or how could line tangle a wing, if the fishing tackle was discarded on the shore?

The facts are that 94 percent of injuries are caused accidentally, by anglers, who were fishing at the time, or to a lesser extent, entanglement in un-attended set lines. Whilst discarded line also presents a threat, a mere 6 percent of birds are entangled in discarded fishing tackle.

It is accepted that most fishers are responsible persons, and do not intentionally injure wildlife. When birds fly into a line, take a cast bait or a lure, or grab a fish as it is being reeled in, it is generally just an unfortunate accident.

However, these types of interactions are developing into a serious threat to our estuarine wildlife and in many cases can be avoided. Three ASR teams working three estuaries in NSW, are rescuing a fishing-tackle-affected bird, on average, every 3 days.

Given the rescue statistics and the nature of the injuries, it is conservatively estimated that on the coast of NSW alone, up to 10,000 birds are affected by interaction with active fishers, every year.

Statistics from S.A Seabird Rescue and W.A. Seabird Rescue confirm that the rate of injury from active fishers is the same across the nation, and may well indicate that up to 30,000 birds become entangled or hooked, nationally, each year.



THE MYTHS:

ASR examined the reasons why this issue had not been taken into consideration in the past. Hundreds of recreational fishers have been spoken to, informally, at every opportunity.

Their general beliefs were:

1. that hooks rust away in a few days, and therefore fishers considered that the bird would survive the ordeal, without the need for further action;
2. that birds only become tangled or hooked in discarded fishing tackle.

(1) 'Hooks rust away':

Many injured birds have been rescued after months of capture attempts. The hooks in the birds were found to be intact when rescued.

Many types of hooks were placed in seawater, fresh water, and hydrochloric (battery) acid. The hooks were still well intact after 6 months, indicating that even the basic 'bronzie' (common steel) hook takes at least 12 months to rust away, even in a salt water environment.

(2) 'Birds only get tangled or hooked in discarded line'

Assessment of the thousands of rescued birds and their injuries, prove that discarded line is responsible for only 6 percent of entanglement and injuries.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

The recreational fishing community, and indeed, members of the public, find it difficult to accept that the majority of injuries are caused by active fishers or unattended set lines.

An approach of not blaming the fishers, is paramount in any awareness campaign.

SUGGESTED STRATEGIES

A national awareness campaign, aimed at recreational fishers and promoting the following information, would serve to dramatically reduce injury to coastal birdlife.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU HOOK OR SEE AN INJURED BIRD

- When fishing, be on the lookout for nearby foraging birds. Diving birds such as terns, or gulls and pelicans may take your bait when you cast your line. Pelicans, which are foraging nearby, may blunder through your line and become entangled or hooked.
- If you hook or entangle a bird, while fishing, do not cut the line.
- Make an attempt to reel the bird in, gently.
- Place a towel or shirt over the bird's head, and, if possible remove the hook and/or line.
- If you cannot remove the hook without incurring further injury to the bird, do not release the bird. Please call your local wildlife group for assistance.
- If the line breaks when attempting to reel in the bird, or you find a bird hooked or entangled, phone your local Wildlife Agency or rescue group, and inform them of the bird, the injury and location.
- Don't use unattended set lines. These lines are a threat when birds forage around the shore or jetties.
- Avoid using stainless steel or alloy hooks. These hooks do not break down in the environment.
- For further advice, contact Australian Seabird Rescue on 0428 862 852.

SUMMARY

As the recreational pressures on the coast steadily increase, so too, does the inevitable clash between people and wildlife. The intense use of coastal resources by residents and tourists alike, is clearly having adverse affects on coastal wildlife.

Active fishing injuries, by far, represent the most significant threat to coastal birdlife, and given the current statistics, may present a serious conservation issue to many species, in the longer term.

Lance Ferris
President
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