

Questions and Answers

1. What do we know about Maui's dolphin?

Maui's dolphin are the world's smallest and rarest dolphin. They are found only on the West Coast of the North Island of New Zealand.

Maui's dolphin are listed internationally as 'critically endangered' (International Union for the Conservation of Nature 'IUCN Red List') and as 'Nationally Critical' under the New Zealand Threat Classification System.

Maui's dolphin are generally found close to shore in groups or pods of several dolphins. They are often seen in water less than 20 metres deep but may also range further offshore, putting them at risk from set nets and other human threats.

The dolphins are known to live for up to 20 years. Females don't breed until seven to nine years of age and produce just one calf every two to four years, making their population increase very slow.

2. What is the relationship between Hector's and Maui's dolphin and how do we know that the dolphins drowned along the North Island West Coast are Maui's?

Maui's dolphin are similar and are the North Island sub-species of Hector's. Hector's dolphin principally occupy the coast of the South Island and their latest official population estimate is 8,000. Hector's dolphin are classified as endangered by the IUCN. They are genetically different and have been separated for several thousand years.

Between 2001-12 samples from live and deceased dolphins along the West Coast of the North Island showed that 97 were confirmed as Maui's and only four as Hector's. One of these Hector's dolphin has been sampled repeatedly over the past decade.

We are not 100 per cent sure that the five dolphins drowned by set netting or the five observed in the Waitara area are Maui's but genetic tests showing that 97 per cent of the dolphins in the area are Maui's make it highly likely.

3. Where is the main habitat for the Maui's dolphin?

The core distribution of Maui's dolphin agreed by an expert panel is currently between Raglan and Kaipara Harbours.

4. What evidence is there that set net fishing is the greatest risk to Maui's dolphin?

The scientific evidence that is part of the review of the Maui's dolphin Threat Management Plan concluded that the greatest risk to Maui's dolphin was from set net fishing.

All of the mortalities of Maui's dolphin since 2000 have been connected to this type of fishing. There was two incidents in 2001; a probable set net entanglement north of Port Waikato and a possible set net entanglement at Port Waikato. The two deaths in 2002 and 2012 are known to have been set net entanglements but it is not known whether this was recreational or commercial set netting. The mortality in January 2012, off the West Coast of the North Island near Taranaki, was confirmed from a commercial set net fisher.

5. What type of set netting is carried out in the proposed Waitara set net fishing ban area?

Set nets are made from fine nylon and are difficult for fish and dolphins like Maui's to detect. Maui's dolphin use echolocation to find their food by sending high frequency clicks that bounce off surrounding objects and fish. However, they are not able to pick up set nets in their surroundings. Commercial set nets can be up to 10 metres high and three kilometres in length in the Taranaki area. They are typically placed out overnight and retrieved the following day.

There are no known recreational set net fishers in these waters beyond two nautical miles but the proposed ban would apply to both recreational and commercial fishers. Recreational fishers are limited to one set net, not exceeding 60 metres in length.

6. What specific reports have there been on Maui's dolphin being present in the proposed Waitara extension of the set net ban area?

There are five sightings between Pariokariwa Point and Waiwhakaiho River Mouth that are further than two nautical miles offshore. These include two sightings off the Pohokura oil rig, 4.4 and 4.7 nautical miles offshore, a sighting 6.9 nautical miles off Mimi Urenui Bay, a sighting 2.5 nautical miles off the Waitara River, and a sighting 2.6 nautical miles off Bell Block, just north of New Plymouth. This sighting was the most recent of the five, in the summer season following the consultation process for the Maui's Dolphin Threat Management Plan.

7. Why is the Government specifically consulting on the proposed Waitara extension to the set net ban?

The Threat Management Plan for Maui's dolphin was reviewed in 2012 with a full public consultation process. However, this specific proposal to extend the set net ban in Waitara was not included as one of the options. The Minister has determined that to be fair to the parties with an interest in the issue there should be specific consultation on the Waitara extension to the set net ban before final decisions are made.

8. What is the process from here on this proposed extension?

The Minister met with the affected fishermen and local iwi this morning to brief them on the proposed extension. They and the general public will have until 10 October 2013 to make submissions. The Minister will, after receiving these submissions and reports from DOC, and after consulting with colleagues, make a decision. The Minister's intention is to make a decision on the set net ban extension at the same time as finalising the overall Threat Management Plan for Maui's dolphin.

9. What is the purpose of the Maui Dolphin Threat Management Plan?

Led by the Ministry of Primary Industries and the Department of Conservation, the draft Threat Management Plan (TMP) assesses the natural and man-made risks to Hector's and Maui's dolphin and puts strategies in place to reduce threats caused by human activities such as fishing, boating and pollution.

The Minister of Conservation and the Minister for Primary Industries are currently considering advice provided on the review of the Maui's dolphin component of the Threat Management Plan.

10. Has this proposal delayed decisions on the overall Threat Management Plan for Maui's dolphin?

Yes. This proposal has come up as part of the consultation of the Threat Management Plan but required additional public consultation. The proposal has also been influenced by new sighting information since the Threat Management Plan was consulted on in the area of the Waitara extension. The Minister of Primary Industries and the Minister of Conservation intend to make final decisions on the Threat Management Plan once decisions have been made on the Waitara extension. This is expected to be in October.

11. What interim measures has the Government taken to protect Maui's dolphin while final decisions on the Threat Management Plan are made?

New Zealand has extensive measures in place to protect Maui's dolphin on the West Coast of the North Island through their known range – including a ban on the use of commercial set nets out to seven nautical miles from Pariokawira Point to north of the Kaipara Harbour.

In June 2012 the Government announced that a further set net ban would be extended along the Taranaki Coast from Pariokariwa Point to Hawera and out to two nautical miles. In addition, the use of commercial set nets between two and seven nautical miles in this area was prohibited without a fisheries observer on-board.

12. What interest has the International Whaling Commission shown in Maui's dolphin and what did they say in their latest report on the species?

The IWC, its scientific committee and its small cetacean subcommittee have shown strong interest in Maui's dolphin and expressed concern about population decline and low abundance.

The Commission at its most recent meeting in Korea in July 2013 called for the Government to take action, to take a precautionary approach, and in particular for the – “full closures of fisheries within the range of the Maui's dolphins that are known to pose a risk of by-catch to small cetaceans.”

13. How many commercial fishers will be affected by the proposed Waitara extension to the set net ban?

Approximately five fishers, who operate six to eight commercial set net vessels, in the area will be affected.

Fish species caught by set netting in the area include Blue Warehou, School Shark, Rig, Trevally, Grey Mullet, Spiny Dogfish, Snapper, Kahawai, Gurnard, and Northern Spiny Dogfish.