SIXTY TONS IN SIX YEARS: REDUCING THREATS TO CALIFORNIA MARINE WILDLIFE THROUGH LOST FISHING GEAR RECOVERY

Kirsten V.K. Gilardi,1* J.R. Renzullo1
1SeaDoc Society, Wildlife Health Center, School of Veterinary Medicine, University of California, Davis, California, 95616, USA

ABSTRACT

Commercial and recreational fishing gear that is accidentally lost or intentionally discarded (i.e."derelict") in the marine environment impacts marine life and underwater habitat worldwide.2,8 Since 2006, the California Lost Fishing Gear Recovery Project (www.lostfishinggear.org), a program of the SeaDoc Society at the UC Davis Wildlife Health Center, has removed more than 60 tons of lost commercial and recreational fishing gear and debris from California coastal waters, as well as more than one million feet of monofilament line from public-access piers. Based on successful programs in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands,3 where derelict gear impacts the recovery of the endangered Hawaiian monk seal,7 and modeled on a similar program in Washington State, the Project contracts with commercial urchin harvesters to locate and recover lost gear utilizing SCUBA diving methods and equipment. A toll-free hotline (1-888-491-GEAR) fields citizen reports of gear loss or sightings. To date, the Project has recovered more than 1,200 lost commercial fishing nets, traps and pots entangling 690 live invertebrates (e.g. lobster, crab) and 106 live fish (e.g. sheephead, garibaldi, sculpin, sharks and hagfish), which were rescued and released. A total of 64 organisms have been discovered dead in recovered lost gear, including nine cormorants, 4 common dolphins and 1 California sea lion. The Project has collaborated with the Monterey Bay and Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuaries on deep water lost gear recovery, and has organized local community groups to install and maintain fishing line recycling bins on public fishing piers to encourage appropriate disposal of unwanted hooks and line. The ultimate goal of the project is to transfer lost gear recovery operations to commercial fishermen’s associations so that fishermen will serve as local leaders in lost gear recovery, garnering public support for their industry; a pilot effort has laid the groundwork for this transfer in Eureka. To better understand the impacts of lost gear on public-trust resources, the Project maintains a comprehensive database, has conducted epidemiologic research on rates of gear entanglement and ingestion in coastal wildlife,1 and in collaboration with the Northwest Straits Initiative, modeled the impacts of derelict nets on Dungeness crab in Puget Sound.4 Lost fishing gear is a proven mitigation measure that reduces risk of injury and death for coastal marine wildlife in California.

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LITERATURE CITED