

# **UK Cetacean Conservation Strategy**

## **Island Communities Impact Assessment**

**December 2025**

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### **1. Step One – Develop a clear understanding of your objective**

#### **1.1 Background**

The UK marine environment is one of the most biologically diverse in Europe, rich in both habitats and species. Whales, dolphins and porpoise (collectively known as 'cetaceans') are commonly seen throughout UK waters. Cetaceans play a vital role in maintaining balance in marine food webs, and as top predators, their abundance and distribution are key indicators to assess the health of the UK's marine ecosystems. However, current pressures and emerging threats are impacting these species in UK waters. Cooperation and collective action are therefore required to tackle these threats.

#### **1.2 What are the objectives of the policy, strategy or service?**

The central vision of the UK Cetacean Conservation Strategy is to ensure the conservation and protection of cetaceans in UK waters. It will also contribute to the UK's vision for a clean, healthy, safe, productive, and biologically diverse oceans and seas.

The Strategy sets out six high-level recommendations where action could be taken to address threats and pressures acting on the species, and where further research is required to improve the current evidence base. These recommendations take account of the main pressures facing cetacean populations, their vulnerability to these pressures, and action already underway across the UK by governments, public bodies, and stakeholders. This will assist in both achieving and maintaining Good Environmental Status in UK waters.

The objectives of the strategy are to:

1. Identify the most important pressures and threats acting on UK cetaceans, assess how they are currently being managed and whether there are gaps in the evidence base and/or management that need to be addressed through focused action.
2. Provide a framework to support delivery of action to address pressures and threats acting on UK cetaceans, with a focus on those identified under the high-level recommendations, where there is evidence of the highest vulnerability.
3. Support delivery of cetacean research and a coordinated programme of monitoring to improve our understanding of cetacean population status and assess the effectiveness of management to reduce threats and pressures facing UK cetaceans.
4. Raise awareness of the conservation, environmental economic and cultural importance of cetaceans, and promote their long-term protection in UK waters
5. Collaborate with our international partners to share knowledge and manage threats and pressures acting on cetacean species, delivering on international obligations to protect cetaceans globally.

6. Implement a process for updating the vulnerability assessments used in the Strategy for cetaceans in UK waters, based on the best available evidence.

The Strategy, as a standalone document, will not impact island communities more significantly than those on the mainland as it is not implementing any new policy. As actions are then developed and taken forward, these will be individually assessed for potential impacts on island-specific communities.

The UK Cetacean Conservation Strategy has been developed by the Scottish Government in collaboration with Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), the Welsh Government (WG), Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Northern Ireland (DAERA) and the UK Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies (Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC), Natural England (NE), Natural Resources Wales (NRW) and Nature Scot).

## **2. Step Two – Gathering data and identifying stakeholders**

### **2.1 Who are our stakeholders?**

Stakeholders for the Strategy include government bodies, non-government organisations, community groups, academia, research institutes, industry and the general public.

Following publication of the Strategy, we will directly engage with our stakeholders to work through the high-level recommendations that identify where action can best be taken. This will help to deliver the vision, aims and objectives of the Strategy whilst identifying who is best placed to deliver this work. It will also allow for island-specific realities to be highlighted and assessed.

### **2.2 What data is currently available?**

A workshop was held in April 2018 which provided the opportunity for stakeholders to provide feedback on the development of the Strategy. The attendees were provided with a draft of the Strategy document, allowing them to review the objectives, the approach used to assess species vulnerability and the list of high-level recommendations and delivery plans.

Data gathered on assessing cetacean population vulnerabilities includes a detailed qualitative assessment undertaken by the Scottish Government in 2021. This assessed nine species of cetacean, using a combination of the best available scientific evidence from research and monitoring programmes and expert judgment. This assessment was designed to reflect and assess cetacean populations at a UK scale and does not include specific data on individual islands.

Specific analysis of data and information regarding pressures which impact island communities will be conducted as the Strategy's high-level recommendations are taken forward and individual actions are established.

### **2.3 How does any existing data differ between islands?**

Data methods used to inform the strategy does not differ across islands or the mainland – there are standard approaches. The Strategy has made a series of high-level recommendations that could, in future, focus on both islands and island communities. These include improving management of wildlife tourism and recreational activities, gaining a better understanding of the impact of marine litter and hazardous substances, and reducing and eliminating bycatch and entanglement of cetaceans in UK waters. However, these would be assessed for potential requirement for individual ICIAAs upon being taken forward. Data gathered to inform the Strategy covers UK waters, which encompasses but are not exclusive to, island regions.

### **3. Step Three – Consultation**

The Scottish Government, on behalf of the other UK administrations undertook a consultation in relation to the UK Cetacean Conservation Strategy between 22 March 2021 and 14 June 2021. The consultation was hosted on the Scottish Government’s consultation hub, Citizen Space, with additional responses gathered via post and email. The consultation asked if the respondent supported the implementation of the Strategy, agreed with the evidence presented, and had any comments regarding vulnerability assessments, potential actions, and the accessibility of the document information. An accompanying consultation document was provided to respondents.

A total of 35 responses were received, with 16 from organisations, and 19 from individuals.

One theme that emerged from responses to the consultation was concern around the species that were not included in the Strategy. In response to this, after the consultation, five additional species and a species group were identified and added to the Strategy. Additionally, a qualitative summary of the main pressures and threats acting on all species was undertaken, including information on the five new species.

Industry stakeholders also provided consultation feedback. Two members of the renewables sector issued a joint response strongly supporting the Strategy whilst acknowledging that offshore wind expansion will coincide with areas protecting dolphin and porpoise, with the wish to expand knowledge and the evidence base on acoustic science. Captured in the high-level recommendations of the Strategy is the need to manage underwater noise at levels that do not adversely affect cetacean populations.

The future of the Strategy vision will be brought about by communication and knowledge exchange between governments, research institutes, academia, industry and the general public. A web page for the Strategy will be created, allowing for documents to be shared and information and updates to be in the public domain. The vision will also be promoted with a dedicated social media campaign, by sharing Strategy recommendations within existing forums and networks, and by engaging with and gathering feedback from key stakeholders.

### **3.1 What questions will you ask when considering how to address island realities?**

The Strategy does not introduce any new policies. Instead, it considers vulnerabilities and pressures facing cetaceans within UK waters and provides a framework for conservation action. At this stage, it would not be relevant to seek and address island specific realities as no policies are being implemented. When policies are taken forward for implementation, these will be assessed individually regarding the impact they may or may not have on islands communities in Scotland.

## **4. Step Four – Assessment**

The Strategy, acting as a framework for high-level recommendations and identifying future actions that could be taken forward to meet its vision, will not have a unique impact on island communities whether that be demographically, economically or socially. There is no evidence that the Strategy will impact on island communities in a manner which differs from rural areas and the rest of Scotland, and the wider UK. The vision for a clean, healthy, safe, productive, and biologically diverse marine and coastal environment will be worked towards with a focus on the challenges faced by cetacean populations across UK waters.

## **5. Conclusion**

In preparing the ICIA, the Scottish Government have formed an opinion that the UK Cetacean Conservation Strategy is not likely to have an effect on an island community which is significantly different from its effect on other communities (including other island communities). The UK Cetacean Conservation Strategy, as outlined within this impact assessment, is a framework to recognise and develop potential actions whilst assisting in identifying where they could be most impactful and influential, in practice. As it stands, new policy will not yet be introduced or implemented within island regions and communities, and therefore, at this stage, a full Islands Community Impact Assessment is not required.

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