



Ghosts in the Ocean

Just off the coast of Cornwall, a young seal – only a few weeks old – ventures away from his mother for the first time. So far in his short life he has been dependent upon her and the fat-rich milk she produces. But now, he has to fend for himself.

Inquisitive by nature, he investigates with his sensitive snout a storm-damaged fishing net, left floating on the tide by commercial fishermen. The smell of rotting fish attracts him, perhaps a remnant of its catch for although abandoned it continues to snare sea animals.

His inspection reveals nothing of interest so he tries to back out of the tangle but can't; the net has looped around his neck like a noose. He arches his body to one side and then the other, spinning around to break free. But the more he struggles, the tighter the line becomes and he is soon entangled completely in the strong nylon fishing gear, with no hope of release.

Over the weeks and months ahead, as he grows up, the cords will cut through his fur and skin, muscle and fat, causing terrible injuries that are open to infection. Eventually he will slowly drown, suffocate or starve but he will die.

Simon Parkin, *Viva!life's* designer and wild ocean swimmer, discovers something in Cornish waters that haunts the world



A sea turtle, drowned by monofilament fishing line caught on the reef in South Florida

Photo © Meaghan Manning/Marine Photobank

On Christmas Eve last year, a seal in this awful condition was discovered near Pendeen in Cornwall by British Divers Marine Life Rescue (BDMLR), an organisation dedicated to rescuing marine animals in distress. The seal was anchored to a rock by the abandoned fishing gear caught around his neck and the incoming tide threatened to drown him.

His saviours managed to cut the fishing gear clear of the rock and rush the distressed seal to the Cornish Seal Sanctuary in Gweek for emergency veterinary treatment. The net was carefully cut from the animal's neck leaving an ugly, raw wound where it had become embedded into his skin. Unravelling, the net turned out to be nine metres long.

Sadly, this seal's plight was not a rarity and since Christmas, BDMLR have rescued eight more seals in Cornwall, all entangled in lost fishing gear, one of whom died.

This isn't a problem restricted to the West Country because fishing gear is lost or abandoned all over the world's oceans where it continues to trap animals. It is referred to as ghost fishing – and it doesn't just affect seals.

These remote killing factories and other marine litter destroy an estimated 136,000



An endangered monk seal pup, entangled and drowned by ghost gear off Hawaii

Photo © D.B. Dalton/Marine Photobank

marine mammals each year through ingestion or entanglement. You can add to that figure an inestimable number of fish, crustaceans and sea birds.

Seabirds, such as Gannets, pick strands from the ghost gear for their nests, oblivious to the material's strength; their chicks can become entangled and never fledge. Migrating turtles swim into abandoned nets which catch around their flippers and necks, either suffocating them or hampering their ability to swim and survive.

Whales, dolphins, porpoises, sea lions... none is immune from the indiscriminate destruction of the ghost nets.

Ghost fishing gear is an inseparable part of the global fishing industry and is abandoned when storms make retrieval impossible or when lines and marker buoys break away and the net cannot be found – or it is simply dumped overboard to save the cost of onshore disposal.

An estimated 640,000 tonnes of fishing gear is added to the world's oceans each year, accumulating with that which is already there to make the marine environment increasingly deadly.

Commercial fishing nets are made from nylon monofilament, used alone or woven into thicker strands, are extraordinarily strong and it is years before the net begins to break up and reduces the harm it does to wildlife. In the deep oceans there is almost a complete lack of sunlight and most will not biodegrade for 600 years or more, prolonging their deadly effects.

Initially, a lost net floats near the sea's surface where fish become ensnared. Seabirds dive into it to feed on the captive prey, only for some to be caught themselves. Larger animals are also attracted by the live bait and they too become trapped.

As the net becomes heavier with constantly accumulating dead bodies, it sinks to the sea floor. The tangle of sealife decomposes until the net is light enough to float when it will rise to the surface of the ocean to repeat its cycle of destruction – over and over again.



An elder duck (protected in the UK), trapped and drowned by the debris from a Scottish fish farm

Photo © British Divers Marine Life Rescue/Marine Photobank

One lucky seal



A young seal is entangled in a discarded fishing net along the Cornish coast



Specialists rescue the distressed seal



When the net is removed an ugly wound is revealed where it has dug into the animal's flesh

This discarded net turns out to be nine metres long



Fully recovered from his ordeal, the seal is released. If only all sea life entanglements had such a happy ending



Photos and information kindly provided by Sue Sayer