



NORTHWEST STRAITS  
marine conservation initiative

# Derelict Fishing Gear Removal Project

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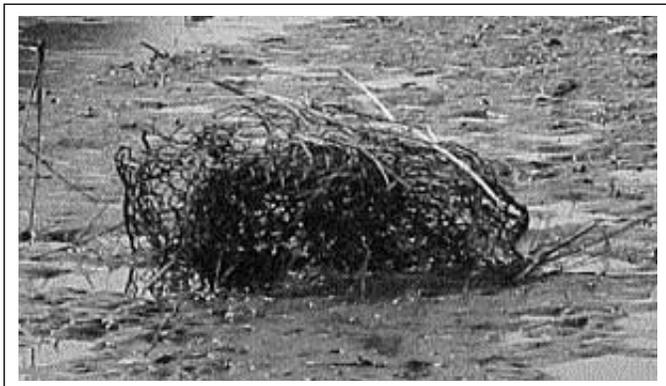
## What is derelict fishing gear?

**D**erelict fishing gear can be nets, lines, crab and shrimp traps or other equipment that is abandoned or lost from fishing vessels and left unattended in the marine environment. Since modern nets and fishing line are made of a monofilament plastic, much of the derelict fishing gear doesn't decompose in the water for many years, even decades.

## How does derelict fishing gear harm the Northwest Straits and elsewhere?

Derelict fishing gear poses many problems to both marine animals and people, including:

- Entangling divers and swimmers,
- Killing or wounding fish, shellfish, birds and marine mammals that become entangled in the nets and other gear,
- Compromising marine ecosystems and species, such as Pacific salmon and rockfish,
- Damaging propellers and rudders of recreational, commercial and military vessels, as well as putting the vessels' crews in danger. Derelict fishing gear has been known to entangle and overturn small boats.



Photograph courtesy of Jeff Rester

## What is being done about derelict fishing gear in Puget Sound?

With funding from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the Northwest Straits Commission (Commission) is working to develop and test protocols for removing derelict fishing gear in the cold, deep waters of northwest Washington, from the Strait of Juan de Fuca and Puget Sound to the Canadian border.

The Commission has identified four fundamental steps for a successful recovery program: locating gear; verifying and setting priorities for removal; removing gear; and reusing, recycling and disposing of gear.

### ▶ Locating

In addition to its work with state agencies to locate lost nets and traps, the Northwest Straits Commission is working with Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) to establish a toll-free hotline and a web site so divers, fishermen, boaters, beach-goers and anyone involved with the marine environment can report sightings of derelict fishing gear. The Commission strongly cautions that recreational divers avoid the gear because of the dangers posed by potential entanglement. Some divers have become entangled and died.

### ▶ Verifying and Prioritizing

Reports of lost gear will be consolidated into a common database that will be used to set priorities for gear removal based on threats to public safety and marine resources, hazards to navigation and other criteria.

### ▶ Removing

Following the protocols developed through this project, trained commercial divers and vessels will physically remove the gear, which can weigh several tons when removed from the water and covered with marine organisms. To reduce the risk to divers and equipment, sidescan sonar or videography may be used to analyze hazards before diving to remove gear.

### ▶ Reusing, Recycling and Disposing

The Commission is exploring recycling opportunities for recovered nets and crab and shrimp traps. In some cases, recovery groups have reused recovered nets, or modified them into other useable items such as soccer nets for recreational play.

## **Who else is involved in derelict fishing gear removal in the Northwest Straits?**

In addition to the Commission, seven Marine Resources Committees and NOAA, partners in derelict fishing gear recovery efforts include the Washington Department of Natural Resources, Tulalip Tribes, Puget Sound Water Quality Action Team, WDFW, commercial fishing and diving companies and private foundations.

## **How much derelict fishing gear is in Puget Sound?**

Since commercial fishermen began using monofilament nets in the 1940s and 1950s, the nets have been accumulating in Puget Sound, and in particular in the Northwest Straits. It is estimated that the multitude of derelict fishing gear in Puget Sound and the Northwest Straits collectively weighs hundreds of tons.

## **Will ownership of the derelict fishing gear be traced and owners fined?**

The Northwest Straits Commission is not interested in assessing blame. The objective of the project is to remove lost and abandoned gear and to help restore Puget Sound and the Northwest Straits. The success of the project will rely on the collective efforts of citizens, government organizations and private businesses that all have a stake in healthy marine life.

## **Is derelict fishing gear a problem elsewhere?**

Derelict fishing gear is not a problem solely of the Northwest Straits. Anywhere that recreational or commercial fishing takes place is likely to have derelict fishing gear that is harming sensitive marine ecosystems, including inland seas like Puget Sound, large estuaries like San Francisco Bay, and open ocean reefs in Hawaii and other Pacific islands.

Last year, expert divers removed 60 tons of nets and debris from reefs and waters around the Hawaiian archipelago. In continuing efforts, fishermen and swimmers sight and report nets and lines, and the federal and state organizations and local businesses work collaboratively to remove the lost gear.

## **What is the Northwest Straits Commission?**

Acting as a “board of directors” for the Northwest Straits Marine Conservation Initiative, the Northwest Straits Commission is made up of citizens representing local, tribal, state and community interests working together to protect vital marine resources. The citizen-based Marine Resource Committees are partners in the Northwest Straits Conservation Initiative and represent seven Northwest counties of Washington.

## **What legal authority exists to support derelict fishing gear removal?**

In 2002, Governor Gary Locke signed into law legislation that urges coordination of derelict fishing gear removal in the state. Working in coordination with the Commission, WDFW will develop a database of gear locations and publish the Commission’s removal protocols as guidelines for future removal efforts.

On other fronts, the Salmon Recovery Funding Board recently awarded the Hood Canal Salmon Enhancement group a grant to explore derelict fishing gear removal in Hood Canal.

### **For more information, contact:**

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