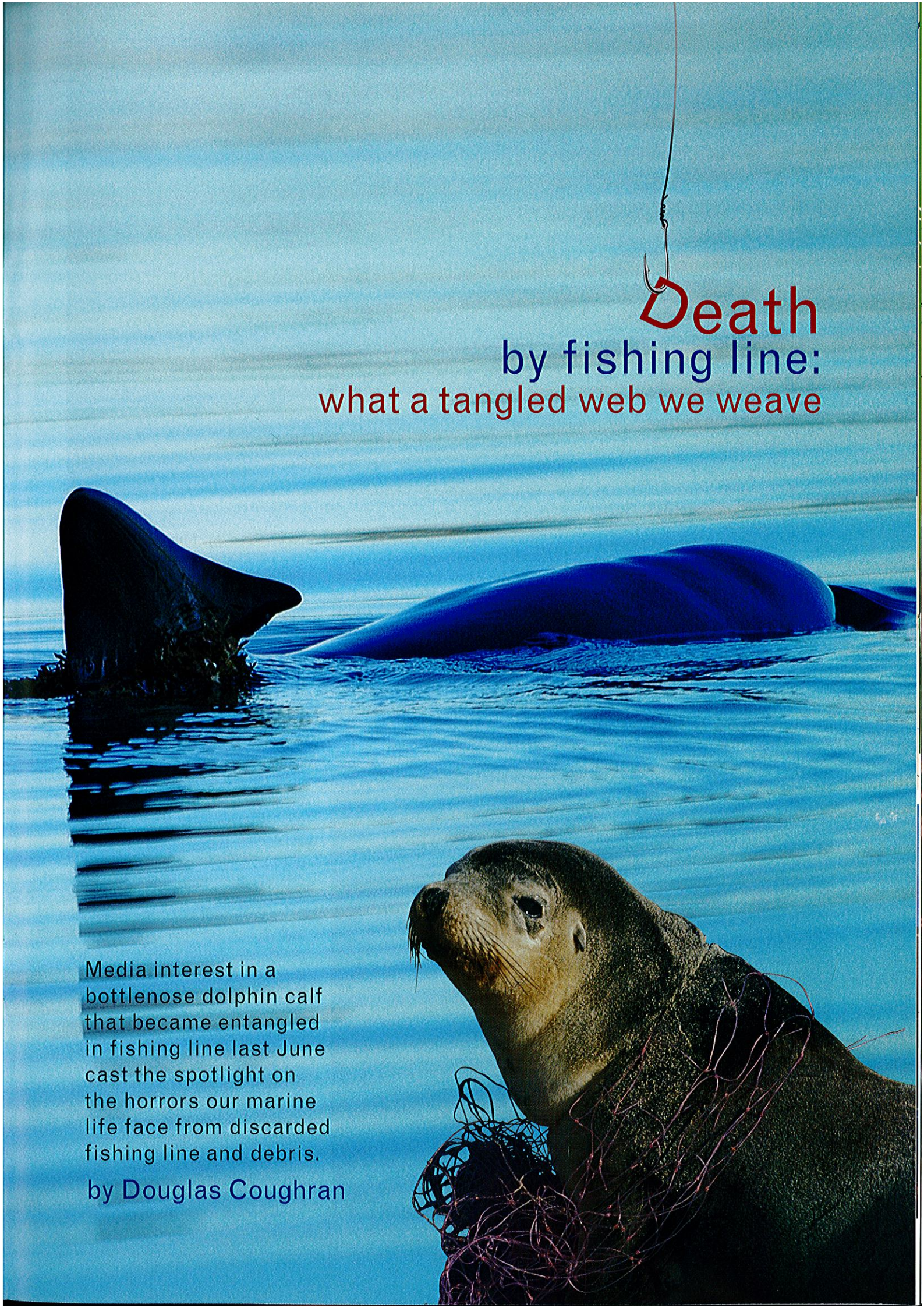




Death
by fishing line:
what a tangled web we weave



Media interest in a bottlenose dolphin calf that became entangled in fishing line last June cast the spotlight on the horrors our marine life face from discarded fishing line and debris.

by Douglas Coughran

It's sunset and a fisherman is standing on a sandy beach, his line in the water, watching a pod of dolphins cruise the waves just offshore. This seemingly idyllic scene is a common occurrence in our island continent where, according to statisticians, fishing is our most popular sport and pastime. With such a large percentage of our population living and relaxing by the sea, many of us have happy memories of fishing and watching dolphins passing by. But do the dolphins we watch have such fond memories of our leisure-time activities in their natural environment?

A life under threat

Increasingly dolphins, and dolphin calves in particular, have become the victims of our careless discard of unwanted fishing line and debris. An incident followed with great interest and concern in the Perth media last winter was the plight of a three-year-old common bottlenose dolphin calf (*Tursiops truncatus*) from the Swan River resident group, fondly named 'Gizmo'.

The calf was initially reported with heavy monofilament line cutting into the leading edge of its dorsal fin. The calf's survival was threatened for more than seven weeks before it was finally captured, disentangled, treated and released to join its very protective mother.

Before its rescue, the calf and its mother ranged from the Canning River and Perth waters all the way to Fremantle. Despite much effort

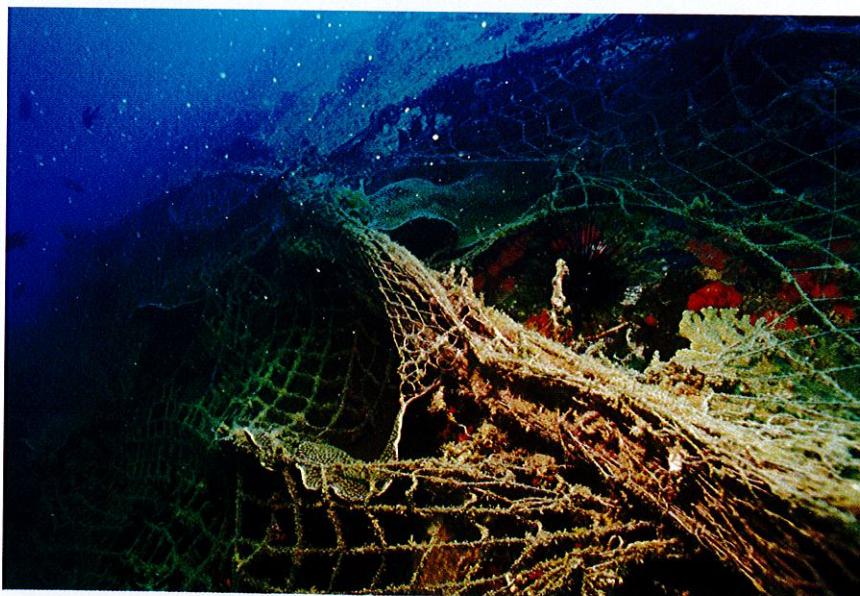


by many people and agencies, the calf evaded assistance until one day in June when officers from the Western Australian Water Police managed to capture it and free the impeding lines. Not only did the calf have a substantial wound, slowly amputating its dorsal fin, upon rescue it was also discovered to have a fishing line entangling its tail fins, preventing it from swimming freely.

Lucky recovery

One of the main reasons it took so long to help the calf was its very protective mother. This breeding female has been the subject of a long-term study of bottlenose dolphins in the

Swan River by Murdoch University scientist Hugh Finn. Hugh described the dolphin as a very experienced mother and this certainly proved to be the case when rescue attempts were made in vain—the mother placed herself between the capture crew and calf, and would immediately lead it to deep water and evade all further capture attempts. The mother learnt very quickly and took pre-emptive action at the slightest indication of an approaching rescue boat. Fortunately, since the calf's capture, treatment and release, it has been sighted with its mother in the Swan River and seems to be doing well.



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Main The damage to Gizmo's dorsal fin by the nylon fishing line.

Photo - DEC

Inset An Australian sea lion (*Neophoca cinerea*) caught in a fishing net.

Photo - Nick Gales/Lochman
Transparencies

Above A crested tern (*Sterna bergii*) with hooks embedded in its mouth.

Photo - Doug Coughran/DEC

Left Discarded fishing net on a coral reef.

Photo - Clay Bryce/Lochman
Transparencies



Above Another dolphin calf entangled in fishing line. The line runs from its mouth, across the eye and cuts into the dorsal fin.
Photo – Sally Kirby

Below A green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) dies in fishing net.
*Photo – Alex Steffe/Lochman
 Transparencies*

Despite its experience as a mother, what the mother dolphin couldn't do was protect its calf from becoming entangled in discarded fishing line. Nor could the mother free the calf from the life-threatening tangle as it tightened its grip, and so commenced the irreversible injury to its dorsal fin. Though the calf's recovery has been quite amazing, the damaged dorsal fin is clearly observed—a vivid reminder of its suffering.

if you carelessly discard line. Or, if you see discarded line on a beachside stroll, pick it up and dispose of it appropriately. Thoughtful action on your behalf may just prevent a dolphin calf from suffering the fate of Gizmo, who now has to live life with a partially amputated dorsal fin. It may even prevent another innocent marine victim from a worse fate of a silent suffering end.

Innocent victims

While the plight of the Swan River bottlenose dolphin calf focused much attention and concern on its wellbeing, it also raised the issue of dolphin entanglement in general. Monofilament fishing line, particularly the type recreational fishers use every day, is slowly maiming and killing not only dolphins but also birds. Over time there have been many such incidents reported of both adult dolphins and calves. Some have ended in successful disentanglement but many have not, resulting in suffering and an agonising death.

Such needless suffering can easily be prevented simply by taking the time to dispose of unwanted line and rubbish in a careful and thoughtful manner. So next time you relax by the water and enjoy a spot of fishing, take a moment to think about the consequences of what may happen



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