



Dolphin observer programme

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The summer dolphin observer programme, set up by the Ministry of Fisheries to monitor the interaction of fishing vessels with Hector's and Maui's dolphins, is now complete and initial findings are being analysed.

Deemed a success by the Ministry, most fishers were supportive of having an observer onboard. Across the programme, there were several hundred sightings of Hector's dolphins, but no injuries or deaths caused by fishing.


Observers were put in place on inshore commercial vessels over January and February, while fishing activity was high and the dolphins were close inshore.

The programme saw 43 observers achieve 963 'sea days' coverage while onboard 45 fishing vessels – well exceeding its target of 900 sea days.

The observers gathered a large amount of information on sightings of Hector's dolphins, other marine mammals and seabirds and how these animals interacted with fishing vessels during fishing operations and when vessels were travelling to and from fishing grounds.

There were accidental deaths of other protected species observed, including seabirds and marine mammals.

While results from the coverage are still being analysed, National Manager of the Environmental team, Steve Halley, says that while accidental deaths of other protected species is a concern, we have been working for some time with environmental organisations, the Department of Conservation and the fishing industry on programmes to identify and minimise the risk from fishing. This new information is timely and will help us better understand and manage these interactions.

"Because this is the first time we have had this number of observers operating in the inshore fishery, we will also be looking at how the programme worked so that we can make improvements if we run something similar in the future." 

NB: Each 'sighting' represents a logged comment about one or more Hector's dolphin. The count is based on each change recording a new interaction or change in abundance logged by the observer (e.g. a reported sequence of encounters such as – 3 Hector's in distance / 2 Hector's in distance / 1 Hector bow riding / animal no longer present = 4 logged 'sighting events').