

Fact Sheet – Protecting Hector’s and Maui’s dolphins

- Hector’s and Maui’s dolphins are among the world’s rarest and smallest dolphins. They are found only in New Zealand’s waters.
- The Hector’s dolphin species is estimated to number fewer than 8,000. It is divided into two sub-species—the Maui’s and South Island Hector’s dolphins.
- The Maui’s dolphin sub-species lives around the North Island’s west coast. It is estimated there are only about 110 dolphins left. The Department of Conservation (DoC) classifies them as “nationally critical”.
- The South Island Hector’s dolphin sub-species lives in three geographically distinct groups around the South Island. On the south coast estimates of dolphin numbers range from about 90 to 400. It is estimated about 1,800 dolphins live on the east coast and about 5,400 on the west coast. DoC classifies them as “nationally endangered”.
- Hector’s and Maui’s dolphins live for only around 20 years and breed slowly. Females don’t have their first calf until they are about seven or eight years old, and have a new calf only every two to four years. This means the species may be threatened by even occasional deaths caused by human activity.
- Fishing is the greatest known human threat to Hector’s and Maui’s dolphins—responsible for about 75 per cent of reported deaths with a known cause.
- The Ministry of Fisheries (MFish) believes reported fishing deaths are an underestimate because there is low observer coverage of commercial fisheries, no formal monitoring of recreational fishing and poor incentives to report entanglements.
- Set nets are the main fishing threat to Hector’s and Maui’s dolphins. They can get entangled in the fine nylon nets and drown. Other key fishing threats are the trawl nets towed by inshore vessels, and the drift nets used around the lower reaches of the Waikato River.
- Other human threats include marine tourism, vessel traffic, mining, construction, coastal development, pollution, sedimentation, oil spills, plastic bags, marine farming and climate change.