



Code of Practice for reducing whale entanglements in South Australia's commercial rock lobster fisheries



BACKGROUND

The South Australian Southern and Northern Zone Rock Lobster Fishery Associations have developed this industry Code of Practice (CoP) in consultation with the Department of Primary Industries and Regions (PIRSA), South Australian Research and Development Institute (SARDI), and the Department for Environment and Water (DEW) to assist fishers to reduce the risk of whale entanglement in South Australian waters.

The primary objective of the CoP is to prevent whale entanglement in rock lobster pot lines through the implementation of best-practice operational measures. In the unlikely event of a whale entanglement, the CoP provides details of who to contact to help determine the appropriate course of action and dispatch response teams where necessary.



ROCK LOBSTER MANAGEMENT

The commercial rock lobster fishery in South Australia is managed in two zones – Southern and Northern. These are separated on the coast at Longitude 139° East, which is on the Coorong near the mouth of the Murray River.

SOUTHERN ZONE	NORTHERN ZONE
1 September to 31 May ~ 750,000 pot lifts / year	1 September to 31 August ~ 250,000 pot lifts / year

The rock lobster management plan is accredited under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act). Fishers that inadvertently interact with a protected species (e.g., whales, dolphins, seals and seabirds) while undertaking legal rock lobster fishing, and correctly report the interaction, are exempt from prosecution.

WHALE ENTANGLEMENTS

Large baleen whales like Southern Rights and Humpbacks have amazing abilities to migrate through the open ocean for thousands of kilometres, communicate over hundreds of kilometres, survive for months without feeding, and recognise individuals and individual boat sounds – but a poor ability to detect, recognise the danger, and avoid nets and ropes in the water.

Entanglement in rock lobster gear happens when whales make inadvertent contact with buoy-lines extending from lobster pots to the ocean surface. This contact can cause lines to become lodged or wrapped around the whale's tail, body, fins or jaw, reducing the whale's ability to swim, feed and breathe. The ropes can cause injuries, leading to a loss of condition, infections, and amputations of fins or flukes.



SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM



Interactions between whales and commercial fisheries occur worldwide. Whale populations are recovering from past exploitation, so more are passing through our coastal waters, and greater vigilance is required to avoid entanglements. Just 1-2 deaths per year from entanglement can hinder population recoveries.

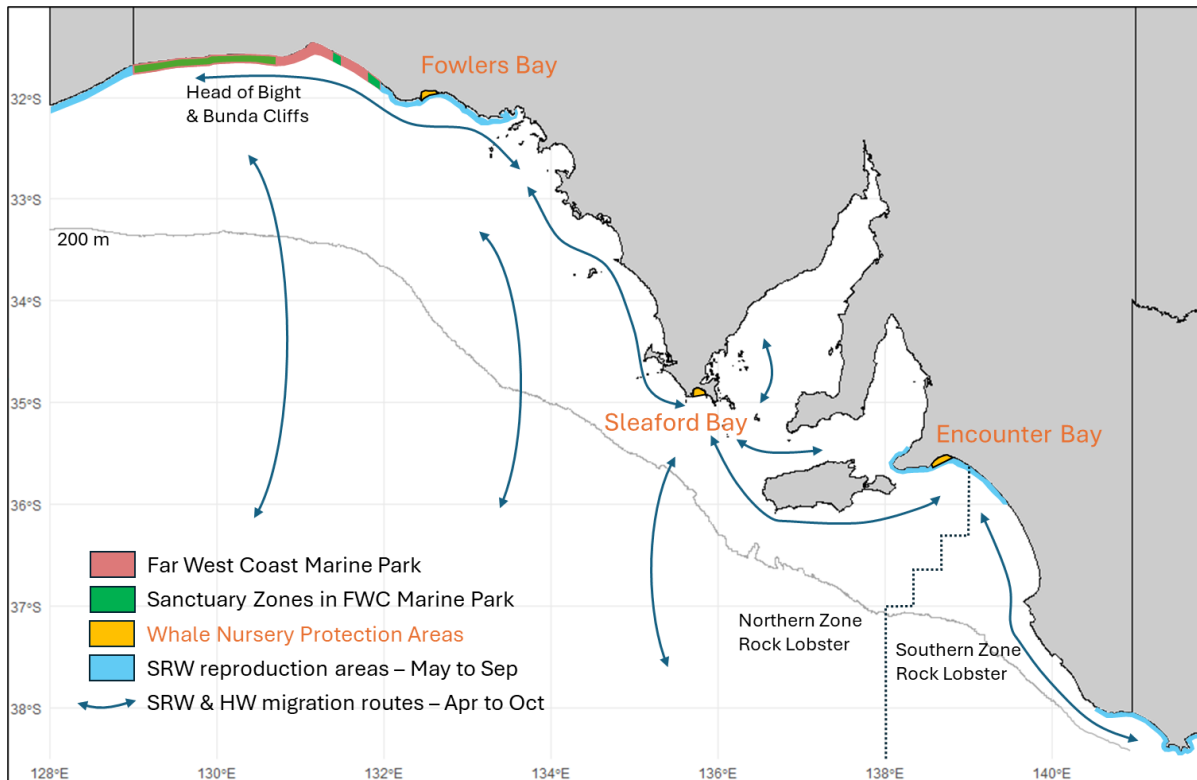
WHALES IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Whale sightings in South Australia have increased. More than 10 whale species are recorded in South Australian waters. The most common and most likely to be entangled in rock lobster buoy-lines are Humpbacks and Southern Rights. These are both large-bodied baleen whales, which feed by gulping tonnes of water at a time and filtering small pelagic schooling prey (i.e., krill and small fish) through baleen plates in their mouths.

Humpback Whales migrate through waters off South Australia from March to December, with numbers peaking in July-August. They arrive from the south then tend to travel eastwards toward Bass Strait. Some remain for weeks in our waters and feed on schools of pelagic fish, such as anchovy. In South Australian waters between 2018-2024, seven of eight whales reported to be entangled in suspected rock lobster gear were Humpback Whales.

Southern Right Whales visit South Australian coastlines between May and October with numbers peaking in July-August. They migrate to bays along our coast to give birth, raise calves, mate, rest and socialise. Calving may occur in virtually any bay along the coast. Whale Nursery Protection Zones have been designated at Encounter Bay, Sleaford Bay and Fowlers Bay, and at the Head of the Bight and Bunda Cliffs (Far West Coast Marine Park) there are access restrictions to protect the largest Southern Right Whale Nursery in the State.

HUMPBACK	SOUTHERN RIGHT
<p>Long pectoral fins – white underside</p> <p>Dorsal hump with small fin</p> <p>White underside</p> <p>Obvious throat pleats</p> <p>No callosities (rough skin lumps)</p> <p>Single exhalation blow</p>	<p>Lobed pectoral fins – black underside</p> <p>No dorsal hump, no dorsal fin</p> <p>Black underside (white belly patch)</p> <p>No throat pleats</p> <p>White callosities on head</p> <p>Double exhalation blow</p>
	



General migration routes of Southern Right Whales (SRW) and Humpback Whales (HW) through waters off South Australia. The dotted line distinguishes management zones for the Southern and Northern Rock Lobster Fisheries, the 200 m line indicates the edge of the continental shelf.

Southern Right Whales arrive from the south and tend to move to reproduction areas, most to the Far West Coast Marine Park and other Nursery Protection Areas. In late season, they depart to the south or west.

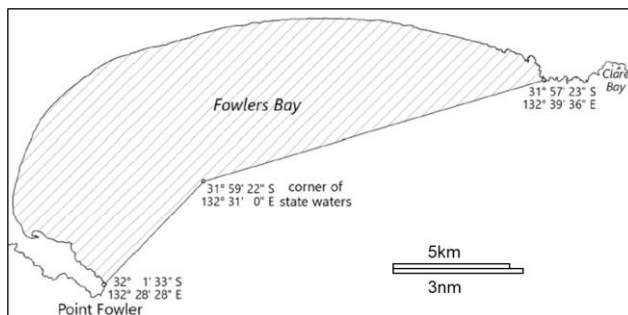
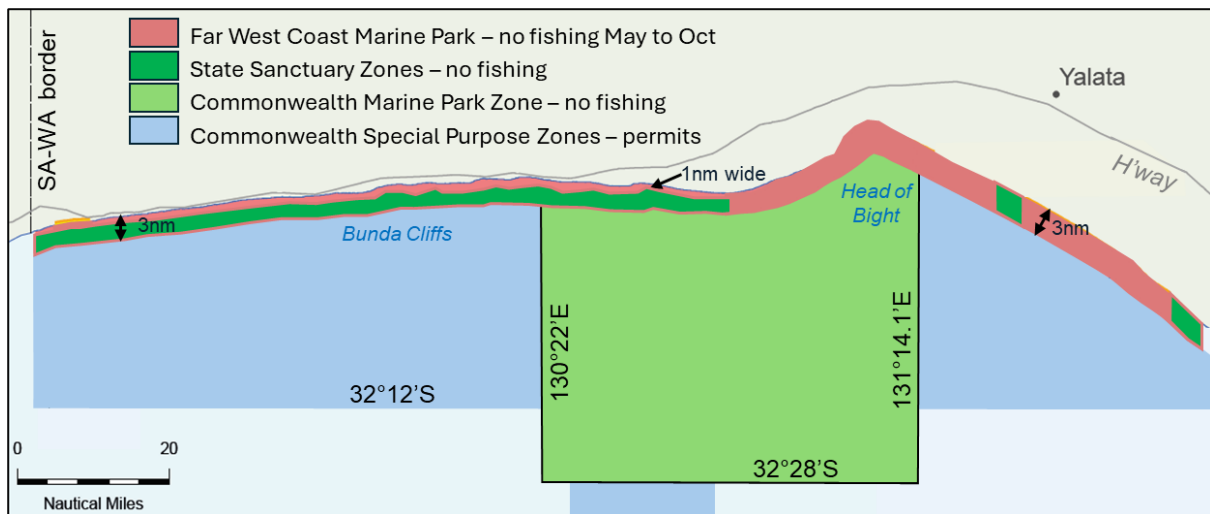
Humpback Whales arrive from the south and tend to migrate east, some feeding along the way. On their return south, few pass near South Australian shores.



WHALE PROTECTION

All whales are protected under the EPBC Act 1999 and South Australia's National Parks and Wildlife Act 1972 (NPW Act 1972). Southern Right Whales are listed as an endangered species with entanglements from fishing gear recorded as a main threat. A priority action is to reduce entanglements from active or discarded fishing gear throughout Australian waters.

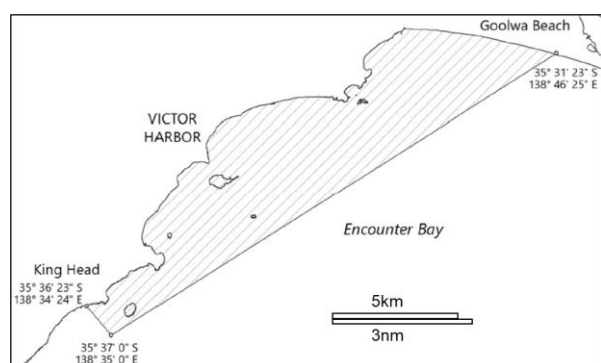
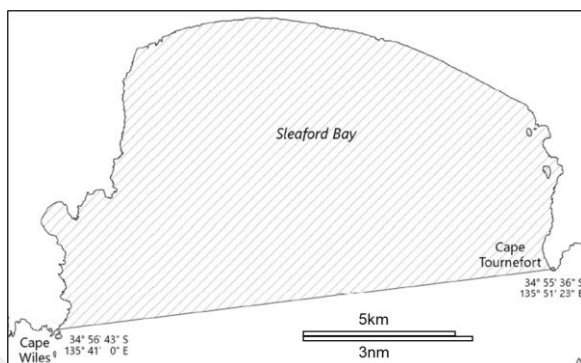
All interactions with whales must be accurately reported in Wildlife Interaction Forms. An interaction means physical contact between the whale and a person, vessel or fishing gear.



Far West Coast Marine Park Area
(fishing restrictions)

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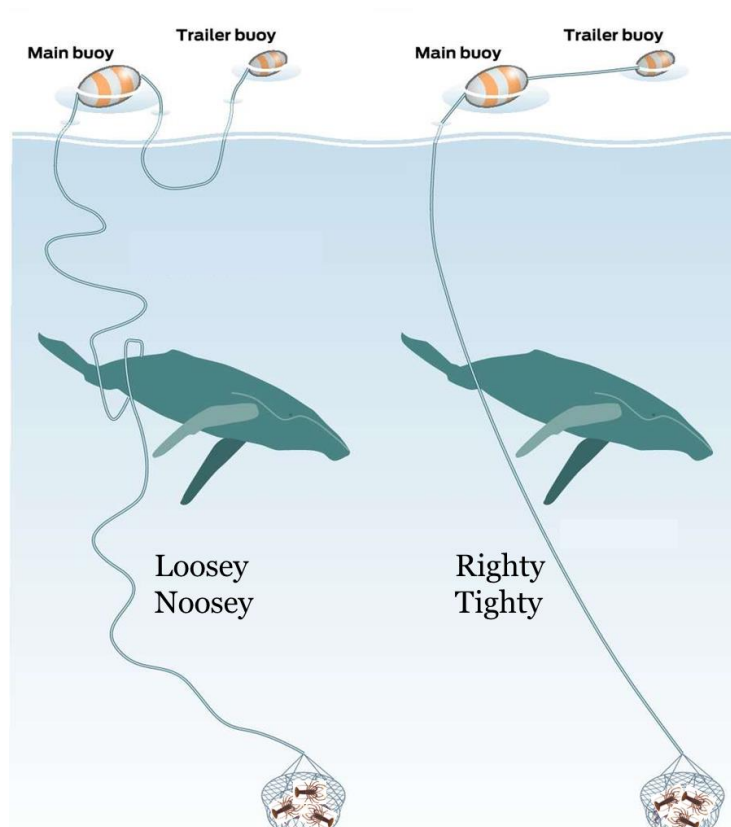
Whale Nursery Protection Areas
in Fowlers Bay, Sleaford Bay &
Encounter Bay



REDUCE WHALE ENTANGLEMENT RISK

Rock lobster fishers are encouraged to adopt the following measures to reduce the risk of whale entanglement.

1. Clearly label all gear as per standard fishing practice.
2. Where possible, avoid using ropes of diameter 10 mm or less. Fine rope is implicated in many whale entanglements.
3. Remove knots in ropes, these can catch on a whale's fins or callosities as the whale brushes past a rope.
4. Limit slack in lines to what is necessary for water depth, tide and current, and for safe recovery. Loose lines entangle whales more easily.
5. Coil and secure excess rope close to the floats.
6. Where possible, avoid setting pots in clusters that could 'fence in' a whale.
7. Check pots at least every 3 days, so if a whale does entangle it can be reported promptly.
8. Be extra careful in winter and spring when whale numbers are highest.
9. Alert other fishers if you sight a whale passing through an area where they may have pots set.
10. Retrieve abandoned and drifting ropes, pot lines and fishing net.



IF YOU SEE AN ENTANGLED WHALE

1. As soon as possible after sighting an entangled whale, report it to your National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) regional duty officer.
2. Rapid reporting gives disentanglement teams (based in Adelaide and Port Lincoln) the best chance to successfully disentangle the whale.
3. Report the whale's species, size, location, direction of travel, speed, and if there are any accompanying whales.

REGION	PHONE (text messages will not get through)
Limestone Coast	08 7424 5770
Kangaroo Island	0477 334 898
Adelaide & Mt Lofty Ranges	0427 556 676
Yorke Peninsula	0417 883 678
Eyre Peninsula & Far West	08 8688 3223

4. Do not attempt to disentangle or remove lines from the whale unless advised to do so by the NPWS. Entangled whales may react violently to a vessel's approach and trailing lines are good 'working lines' for disentanglement teams.
5. Abide by legislated exclusion zones around whales in South Australia.

*Do not approach closer than **300 m** if:*

- whales are distressed, stranded or entangled
- calves are present
- you are within a Whale Nursery Protection Area
- you are in a prescribed vessel (e.g., jet ski, or water skiing)

*Do not approach closer than **100 m** if:*

- you are in a vessel such as a cabin cruiser, 'tinny', or inflatable

If closer than 300 m: max. speed 4 knots; max. time 60 min.; no anchoring.

6. If possible, take photos or videos, these will assist individual whale identification and planning for the disentanglement. The NPWS may authorise an approach to 100 m to obtain good photos.
7. Maintain visual contact with the entangled whale for as long as possible.

BENEFITS OF THE CODE OF PRACTICE

- Following the Code reduces the risk of a whale entanglements occurring.
- The Code promotes appropriate and safe responses in the event of a whale entanglement.
- It helps prevent damage to or loss of fishing gear and catch due to whale entanglements.
- It demonstrates to the community that the South Australian rock lobster fishery actively responds to environmental issues.
- It gives fishers the knowledge that their industry is striving to minimise impacts on the environment where they work.



Photo credits: Adrian Linnane (SARDI), Roger Kirkwood (SARDI), Darryl Cowan (DEW)

