

## Wind farm worries

Britain's cetaceans need more support from the increasing exploitation of the marine environment, according to a new report, writes **Nigel Williams**.

The 'functional extinction' of one of the world's cetaceans (see pages R783–R784) is a sober reminder of the threats facing the many other members of this group of aquatic mammals. And in a new report published last month, Britain, which has some of the strongest legislation protecting these mammals in principle, in fact is seeing major problems for the animals in its waters.

The international organisation monitoring the global position of cetaceans produced its first national report last month on the state of these creatures around the UK, highlighting the many problems they face.

The Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society (WDCS), brings together for the first time all current threats facing UK cetaceans, and calls on the government to commit to improving the protection of whales and dolphins and highlights threats and possible remedies.

To accompany the report, the WDCS has produced a score sheet which grades the government's action on a number of the most serious threats to UK wildlife on a scale from 1 to 10. Many of the conclusions rate the government's action at just 1 out of 10.

The report, which was sent to all of Britain's members of parliament, highlighted the scores given to the UK in terms of its action on fisheries bycatch (2/10), chemical pollution (4/10), noise pollution (1/10), boat traffic (1/10) and climate change (3/10). "These scores demonstrate how seriously the government is underachieving and shows how little is being done to stop harmful threats to whales and dolphins in UK seas," says Mark Simmonds, WDCS international director of science.

There are the standard problems that cetaceans face in any busy shallow coastal



**Bad vibes:** There are worries that developments such as offshore wind farms may be adversely affecting whale and dolphin populations. (Photo: Matt Cardy/Getty Images.)

waters; pollution, fishing — in which they can drown in nets as bycatch — and physical injury from increasingly fast marine craft.

But one of the greatest concerns — and unknowns — is that of noise pollution. Not only generated from shipping, it results from construction activity in oil and gas fields and a newly expanding activity: offshore wind farms.

Britain's high dependence on fossil fuels for its energy supply and a decreasing choice of land-based wind farm sites, has meant increasing attention turning to potential offshore sites. While the noise of construction is comparable and equally intrusive as for other offshore developments, there is increasing concern about the noise generated by completed wind turbines merely in operation and the lack of research on this ongoing noise pollution on cetaceans, and indeed on other marine life. "When in operation, windfarms produce a considerable amount of low frequency noise", the report says.

The impact of this noise is controversial, partly because it is such a new phenomenon, and partly because little research has been carried out.

But the report highlights worries that what work has been done, particularly concerning noise pollution, involved considerable conflicts of interest. "Many of the supposed independent scientists who are supposed to be giving unbiased advice to the government to deal with the issue have received substantial funding, either directly or for their organisations, from the major producers of noise pollution," says Chris Parsons of George Mason University, Virginia, the lead author on the report.

"Cetaceans in UK and adjacent waters are being adversely affected by various human-generated activities. The precise significance of virtually all of these is poorly known and this situation is made even worse because we also know little of the distributions and habitat needs of these animals."

In short, we may well be in danger in the seas of repeating the mistakes made earlier on land for many terrestrial species: driving them from their natural habitats, reducing ranges and depleting or even extinguishing populations. For marine animals the old adage of 'out of sight and out of mind' still applies all too often and it is likely that the cumulative impact of human pressures is compromising the very survival of cetaceans around the UK," the report says.

"There's an urgent need for a truly independent funding and oversight agency for cetacean conservation... Ideally a UK equivalent of America's extremely successful Marine Mammal Commission," says Parsons.

The UK government is coming under increasing pressure to implement its promised but delayed pioneering Marine Bill to regulate the growing and conflicting interests in its offshore waters. For many conservationists that cannot come soon enough but there is likely to be many a battle yet.