**Reducing the Bycatch**

Every year thousands of turtles, dolphins, whales, sharks and other such ecologically important species become entangled in fishing nets and eventually die. This is not only threatening the rich marine ecosystems but many of the unique animals have started disappearing from the waters. Experts are of the view that if certain modifications are made in the fishing gear and awareness is raised among fishers, mortality of these animals can be reduced to a greater extent and the health of oceans can be improved.

Introduction of innovative fishing methods and adaptation of technology in fishing can have long term benefits. This will help improve the fish stocks and livelihood of the fishers. If fishers are adequately sensitized on these issues, they can readily make changes in their traditional fishing practices and minimise the ‘roadkill on ocean highways’ - a term used for killing of marine life in fishing nets in oceans. Considering the high mortality of endangered, threatened and protected species in marine waters of Pakistan, WWF-Pakistan with support of Engro Foundation developed a strategy to protect these ecologically important animals. Both organizations decided to act immediately by saving the lives of those that face accidents on ocean highways.

The strategy adopted is primarily aimed to minimize the “roadkill” of bycatch species, by releasing them safely from the gillnets. This all started about 4 years ago, while having a briefing session with fishers who do fishing in coastal and high seas of Pakistan. Fishers informed that normally turtles, whales, sharks and other such species become entangled in their gillnets and in most cases animals die. WWF-Pakistan through its Observer Programme educated the fishers on how to safely release such animals if they are caught in the fishing nets. Under this initiative, awareness sessions are conducted on regular basis with fishers of Ibrahim Hyderi, Rehri and Kakapir in Karachi. Fishers are taught with help of safe release videos, interactive discussion and awareness material distributed among them.

Through this programme, fishers not only safely release the entangled animals but also collect the fishing data. They record the location, size and other information about bycatch species. This data is used in assessing the frequency of bycatch of important species. From the last four years, the information about safe release of marine animals kept on pouring in. Through verbal descriptions and video clips taken by digital cameras or mobile phones, in which one can see fishermen releasing turtles or other animals in the best possible way. They are especially careful that these animals may not get injured in the process of disentanglement or during release. We are really proud of these fishermen who learned so quickly and are saving many of marine animals which is a remarkable achievement.

This has turned out to be a successful venture. We receive information and video clips of non-target animals being released by fishermen including baleen whales, dolphins, whale sharks, sunfish, sea snakes, marine birds, manta and mobulid rays. Previously fishermen used to dump most of these animals back in the sea without caring about their ecological importance.

Although the “accidents” on the ”ocean highways” cannot be stopped and some of these have resulted in “roadkill,” are now having a system of “road safety” in which some of the victims of entanglements are still alive and safely released.