

Māui & Hector's Dolphins

Māui and Hector's dolphins are only found in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Different groups have distinct names given by local hapū, including Popoto (for Māui dolphins), Tutumairekurai, Aihe, Papakanua, Upokohue, Tukuperu, Tupoupou, Hopuhopu, and Pahu.

Sub-Species

- Before 2002, they were all called Hector's dolphins because they all look alike.
- Māui were later identified as a separate subspecies due to their slight genetic and physical differences, and were renamed.
- It is now known that there **at least four or five sub-species that are genetically and geographically distinct.**

Habitat:

- Māui dolphins are only found on the west coast of the North Island.
- Hector's are found all around the coast of Aotearoa New Zealand
- They live close to shore and can often be seen from local beaches and river and harbour mouths
- They swim for food to depths of 100m.



Photo: Silvia Scali

Quick Facts:

- There are thought to be less than 50 adult Māui remaining.
- Some of the Hector's dolphin populations are even fewer in number
- Māui and Hector's are the world's smallest dolphins, with a unique rounded dorsal fin. They are also among the world's rarest.
- They have a shorter lifespan than other dolphins, only living until their mid-20s.
- Females typically give birth to their first calves between five to nine years of age and only have one calf every two to four years.
- They mainly communicate using clicks, which are so high-pitched humans can't hear them.



At risk of extinction

- With short lifespans and decreasing reproduction rates, the Māui dolphins are classified as *Nationally Critical* species.
- Hector's dolphins as a whole are *Nationally Endangered* though the small sub-populations are at real threat of localised extinction

Threats to survival:

Destructive Fishing Practices

Trawl and set nets kill more Māui and Hector's than any other known cause. You can see the mortality data [here](#).



Photo: Rob Pine

Māui and Hector's dolphins eat fish that live on the sea floor. They are also often near fishing boats with trawl nets, hunting the same fish as the trawlers.

Boat Strikes Kill Dolphins

Dolphins, and especially calves are unable to dive quickly and deeply enough to avoid fast moving boats. On 6 March 2025 this very small Hector's dolphin calf was found around 2km off Lyttelton harbour mouth, killed by boat strike.

Environmental Threats:

- *Toxoplasmosis* is a parasitic disease that can effect dolphins. Toxoplasmosis can cause death, still births and reduced reproductive rates.
- *Climate change* and the increased frequency of extreme weather events are a possible reason for the separation of Hector's dolphin calves from their mothers, resulting in the death of the calf. Rising sea temperatures can also disrupt the food web, and if their prey move to deeper or cooler waters, dolphins may struggle to find food or may move to unprotected areas.
- *Pollution* such as plastic debris, litter, metal toxins, oil spills, pathogens and organochlorines are also increasingly harming Māui and Hector's dolphins.
- *Tourism*, including cruise ships, can have harmful impacts from boat strike, noise, pollution, disruption and disturbance.



Photo supplied by:
Māui and Hector's Dolphin Defenders

What Needs To Be Done

Urgent implementation of key measures, alongside strong legislative and community backing, is essential to save the critically endangered Māui and Hector's dolphins and ensure the health of marine ecosystems.

1. Expand Protected Areas and Fishing Bans

- Protect Māui and Hector's dolphin habitat out to the 20nm / 100m deep range, and inside harbours, wherever they are found.
- Ban both set-net fishing and trawl fishing within their range to eliminate harmful practices in their critical habitat.

2. Sustainable Fishing Practices to Allow Ecosystems to Revive

Reduce catch limits for commercial and recreational fishing within the Māui and Hector's dolphin habitat to allow for an overall increase in marine bio-abundance, ensuring a healthier ecosystem for prey species.

3. Address Climate Change

Take strong action to combat climate change, a major factor affecting ocean health and the ecosystems Māui and Hector's dolphins rely on.

4. Public Engagement

- Public reporting of Māui and Hector's dolphin sightings, illegal activities, and environmental hazards.
- Restore waterways that feed into the ocean.
- Advocate for stronger Māui and Hector's dolphin and oceans protections.
- Engage with the Māui and Hector's Dolphin Defenders page on Facebook.

5. Monitoring and Research of Threats and Solutions

- Ongoing non-intrusive studies to assess the health, population dynamics, and risks faced by Māui and Hector's dolphins.
- Invest in understanding how diseases and pollutants interact with other threats, and prioritise preventative measures.

Plushies

If you would like to order a Māui / Hector's soft toy plushie please scan this QR code:



Save Māui and Hector's Dolphins

What Can You Do?

- Support calls for Māui and Hector's protected areas to be extended to the 20m / 100m deep range.
- Support bans on set-net fishing and trawling in the entire Māui and Hector's habitat.
- Avoid eating fish caught using set and trawl nets. Most fish from your local fish and chip shop is caught using methods that result in by-catch of dolphins, sharks and birds.
- Join Awhi Awa | Embrace a Stream to learn more about Māui and Hector's Dolphins and what you can do.



Awhi Awa - Embrace a Stream!

Take care of a waterway near you! Streams drain to the sea, and by improving freshwater streams we can enhance the habitats of Māui and Hector's dolphins. You can purchase a kete and action pack on our website:



In Aotearoa there are strict rules for interacting with marine mammals like dolphins, whales, and seals to ensure their safety and wellbeing:

- Keep at least 50 metres away from dolphins, whales, and seals.
- Stay at least 200 metres away from any pod with a calf (baby marine mammals).
- Only three vessels are allowed within 300 metres of any marine mammal.
- Turn your engine to neutral or idle if a marine mammal approaches your boat.
- Do not swim with Māui or Hector's Dolphins or pods containing calves.

Rounded Fin - Ring it in!

Report Māui and Hector's dolphin sightings -
Call 0800 DOC HOT (0800 362 468) or report via:
www.doc.govt.nz/marine-mammal-sighting-form



Find out more and support much needed change for Māui and Hector's dolphins here:



www.endangeredspecies.org.nz/maui-dolphin

