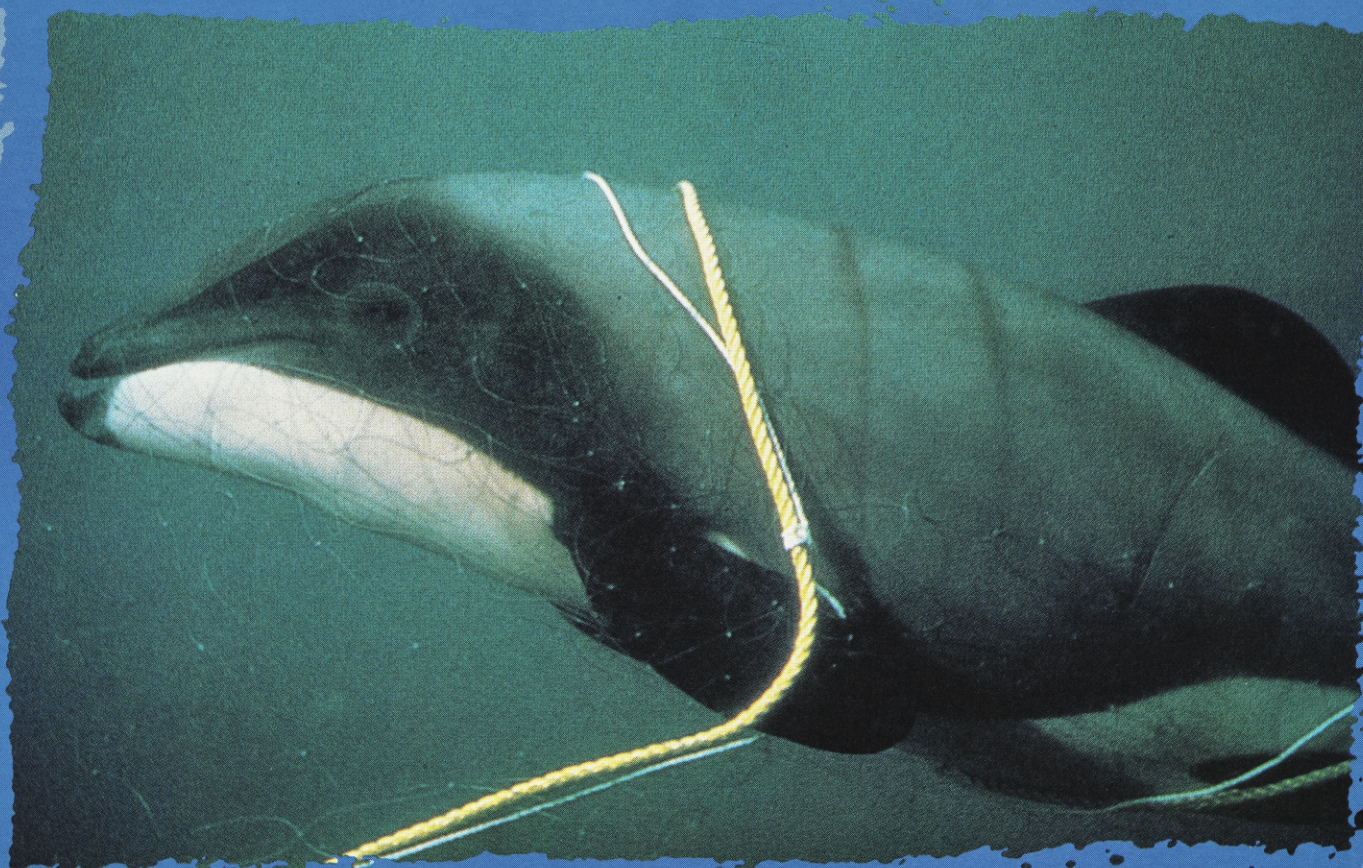


# NET LOSSES

by Mark Feldman



*Hector's dolphin, caught in a gill net. The threat to the long term viability of this species led to the creation of the Banks Peninsula Marine Mammal Sanctuary in December 1988. Photo: Steve Dawson*

**I**T WAS LATE SPRING and the school of kingfish was moving along the East Coast towards its summer home in Doubtless Bay. The leader of the school was a powerful fish that weighed just over ten kilograms. He was a beautiful creature with a dark blue-green back and silver-white belly. A bright yellow stripe along his side separated the other colours and splashed onto his muscular tail. That powerful tail propelled him effortlessly through open water as the school prepared to look for a place to feed.

Finding food these days was an easy matter, and represented no real challenge to the young leader. In earlier years they had been forced to chase schools of koheru and mackerel offshore where it took considerable teamwork to corner their prey. It was far easier to catch their food near reefs and rocky shorelines but there had always been resident kingfish at these reefs. The resident fish were much older and larger. They guarded their

territory jealously, seldom giving the school enough time to eat before the young kingfish were driven off.

But now most of those big kingfish were gone and the school was free to feed wherever they chose. There was also lots to eat. There were more koheru and mackerel than the young leader could ever remember. Most of the kingfish and kahawai that used to compete for food had been caught by humans. As a result, the smaller mackerel had been able to increase their numbers unchecked. It was a simple matter to herd these small fish into a tight school and then drive them up against a rock face where the kingfish could take turns swooping in for their morning meal.

Life was easy for the school of young kingfish but danger lurked wherever they travelled. The last leader of the school had been caught by some sort of nearly invisible net. The monofilament strands of the loosely set net had tangled around his fins and

scales. The more he struggled the more the net settled around him. After struggling for hours death had finally overtaken him.

A few other members of the school had perished in that net as well. The new leader did not understand how the nets worked but he knew they represented a slow death for any fish that was unlucky enough to be caught. He had witnessed what happened to the last leader and had swum around the net for almost an hour as the school watched the trapped fish struggle to get free. Finally they had given up and moved on, leaving their leader and compatriots behind to die slowly in the dreaded net.

Now the school was fast approaching the rocky headland near the entrance to Doubtless Bay. There were always lots of small mackerel to be found milling around the cliff faces and the kingfish were hoping to find an easy meal there. In the past years there used to be several thirty kilogram kingfish living