# Irish whale-watching company halts tours as overfishing empties southern Atlantic waters



A whale-watching company in Ireland has taken the unprecedented step of ceasing operations along the southern Atlantic coast, attributing its closure to the devastating effects of overfishing on local marine life. Colin Barnes, the operator of Cork Whale Watch, announced that the waters, once teeming with wildlife, have become barren due to the unsustainable extraction of sprat—a critical component of the marine food chain. In his poignant farewell statement, he lamented, “Sadly, our world-class whale watching is now a thing of the past,” underscoring the alarming decline in the presence of humpback, minke, and fin whales, as well as dolphins.

For over 25 years, the company flourished in the picturesque village of Unionhall, but recent seasons have seen a stark reduction in whale and dolphin sightings. Barnes reported that conditions have reached a point where only a few minke whales and scattered groups of dolphins remain visible during tours, resulting in a series of increasingly disappointing excursions over the past few years. This trend has prompted public outcry, drawing attention to the broader issues of marine biodiversity and food security.

The Irish government has responded with promises to implement measures aimed at protecting fish stocks and sustaining marine ecosystems, a necessary step in the face of a looming crisis. Christopher O’Sullivan, the minister for nature and biodiversity, expressed urgency in safeguarding sprat populations, stating that neglecting this forage species could lead to the collapse of a crucial food web not just for whales, but for various marine life dependent on it.

The crisis of overfishing, exacerbated by rising demand for fishmeal primarily for aquaculture, has drastically increased sprat fishing. This tiny, sardine-like fish plays a pivotal role in supporting larger fish and marine mammals, making its depletion a pressing concern. Experts warn that practices such as pair trawling—where two boats drag enormous nets through the water—exacerbate the depletion of sprat stocks, further destabilising marine ecosystems.

Mark Gannon, who operates Atlantic Whale and Wildlife Tours just east of Unionhall, echoed these concerns, noting a significant decrease in whale and dolphin sightings since the onset of aggressive fishing practices. He likened the effects of overfishing to a farmer stripping his fields of grass and expecting his livestock to thrive. Despite this troubling trend, Gannon remains hopeful. He has invested in new vessels and reports strong enthusiasm for his excursions, even if wildlife encounters have diminished significantly compared to previous years.

The ongoing situation has led to calls for comprehensive scientific assessments and stronger management policies for sprat fisheries. Patrick Murphy, chief executive of the Irish South and West Fish Producer’s Organisation, has highlighted the potential impact of rising sea temperatures which appear to be pushing sprat populations further west and north, emphasizing the need for sustainable practices in response to these environmental shifts.

Regulatory frameworks currently lag behind the urgent needs of marine life. The Irish Wildlife Trust, among others, advocates for the prohibition of pair trawling in coastal zones and stresses the necessity of protecting pivotal forage species like sprat. Without such protections, Irish marine environments risk becoming increasingly lifeless, endangering not just whale populations but the entire marine ecosystem.

As debates continue over fishing policies and sustainability, the fate of Ireland's once-vibrant whale-watching industry serves as a stark reminder of the interconnectedness of marine life and the dire consequences of human activity on nature’s delicate balance. If comprehensive and protective measures are not instituted soon, the region risks losing not just its marine diversity, but a cherished aspect of its natural heritage.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/may/30/irish-whale-watching-company-ends-tours-on-south-atlantic-coast-and-blames-overfishing), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/may/30/irish-whale-watching-company-ends-tours-on-south-atlantic-coast-and-blames-overfishing)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/may/30/irish-whale-watching-company-ends-tours-on-south-atlantic-coast-and-blames-overfishing), [[4]](https://www.sustainableshores.ie/overfishing), [[5]](https://www.irishexaminer.com/property/homeandgardens/arid-40712231.html)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://iwt.ie/prohibition-pair-trawling-coastal-areas/), [[6]](https://www.irishtimes.com/environment/climate-crisis/2025/01/09/how-krill-fishing-threatens-whale-recovery-in-antarctica/), [[7]](https://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/outdoors/arid-41539166.html)
* Paragraph 4 – [[5]](https://www.irishexaminer.com/property/homeandgardens/arid-40712231.html), [[6]](https://www.irishtimes.com/environment/climate-crisis/2025/01/09/how-krill-fishing-threatens-whale-recovery-in-antarctica/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[4]](https://www.sustainableshores.ie/overfishing), [[5]](https://www.irishexaminer.com/property/homeandgardens/arid-40712231.html)
* Paragraph 6 – [[4]](https://www.sustainableshores.ie/overfishing), [[5]](https://www.irishexaminer.com/property/homeandgardens/arid-40712231.html)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/may/30/irish-whale-watching-company-ends-tours-on-south-atlantic-coast-and-blames-overfishing> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/may/30/irish-whale-watching-company-ends-tours-on-south-atlantic-coast-and-blames-overfishing> - An Irish whale-watching company, Cork Whale Watch, has ceased operations off Ireland's southern Atlantic coast, citing overfishing of sprat as the cause. The depletion of sprat has disrupted the marine food chain, leading to the migration of humpback, minke, and fin whales, as well as dolphins, from the area. The company, based in Unionhall, had been operating for 25 years but now reports a significant decline in marine life sightings, prompting the closure of their tours.
3. <https://iwt.ie/prohibition-pair-trawling-coastal-areas/> - The Irish Wildlife Trust advocates for the prohibition of pair trawling in coastal areas. This fishing method involves two boats dragging a single large net with small meshing, targeting sprat, a vital forage fish. The practice is detrimental to marine ecosystems, as it depletes food sources for larger fish, seabirds, and marine mammals, and can inadvertently capture seals, dolphins, and juvenile fish species.
4. <https://www.sustainableshores.ie/overfishing> - Sustainable Shores highlights the issue of overfishing in Irish waters, particularly focusing on sprat. Sprat, a small fish that forms the base of the marine food web, is caught in large quantities annually, yet remains unprotected under Irish law. The lack of regulation and management plans for sprat fishing poses a significant threat to marine biodiversity and the sustainability of the fishing industry.
5. <https://www.irishexaminer.com/property/homeandgardens/arid-40712231.html> - Damien Enright discusses the impact of overfishing sprat in Irish bays, emphasizing that removing sprat and sand eels—the base of the marine food chain—leads to starvation of larger fish species. The practice of pair trawling, which scoops up vast amounts of these small fish, results in lifeless bays and estuaries, highlighting the need for government intervention to protect these vital species.
6. <https://www.irishtimes.com/environment/climate-crisis/2025/01/09/how-krill-fishing-threatens-whale-recovery-in-antarctica/> - The Irish Times reports on the threat krill fishing poses to whale recovery in Antarctica. Similar to the unregulated sprat fishery in Ireland, krill fishing exemplifies 'fishing down the food web,' where smaller fish are targeted, disrupting the entire marine ecosystem. The lack of regulation and the high demand for krill in aquaculture and animal feed are leading to significant declines in whale populations.
7. <https://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/outdoors/arid-41539166.html> - Pádraic Fogarty discusses the practice of pair trawling in Irish waters, where two boats drag a single net to scoop up shoals of small fish, usually sprats. This method is detrimental to marine ecosystems, as it depletes food sources for larger fish, seabirds, and marine mammals, and can inadvertently capture seals, dolphins, and juvenile fish species, highlighting the need for regulatory measures.