# Irish whale-watching company closes as overfishing empties southern Atlantic coast waters



A whale-watching company in Ireland has announced the closure of its operations along the southern Atlantic coast, declaring the local waters devoid of life. Colin Barnes, the proprietor of Cork Whale Watch, cited the detrimental effects of overfishing on sprat, a small fish that serves as a critical food source for various marine species, including humpback and minke whales and dolphins. In a heartfelt message, he lamented, “Sadly, our world-class whale watching is now a thing of the past,” attributing the decline in sightings to the unsustainable practices of a select few fishermen exploiting marine resources without regard for long-term ecological health.

Cork Whale Watch, which enjoyed a robust 25-year run, has witnessed a stark decrease in whale sightings, with only the occasional minke whale and small pod of dolphins reported. As Barnes indicated, the once flourishing marine tourism initiative has become disheartening for both operators and patrons. His announcement has ignited a public outcry and prompted government officials to reconsider existing fisheries management policies. Christopher O’Sullivan, the minister responsible for nature and biodiversity, emphasised the urgent need to protect sprat, not just for the sake of whale conservation but for the health of the entire marine food web. The Irish government has signalled intent to adopt protective measures similar to those in the UK, where restrictions on sprat fishing have begun to show positive results.

Environmental groups and fellow operators have echoed these concerns. Mark and Patricia Gannon, who run Atlantic Whale and Wildlife Tours, noted that the local whale and dolphin populations have diminished as large trawlers have increased their catch of sprat. Mark Gannon articulated the analogy of a farmer stripping grass from pastures and expecting livestock to flourish, underscoring the devastating impact of unchecked fishing practices. Despite the challenges, the Gannons continue to operate their tours, albeit with reduced wildlife encounters. “Just today we saw three minke whales,” Mark reported, indicating that while sightings are fewer, the region’s natural beauty remains appealing to visitors.

Rising costs, including fuel and food, have also begun to take a toll on the marine tourism sector, as highlighted by reports of financial strain among operators like the Gannons. The situation is complicated further by climate change, which appears to be shifting sprat populations further west and north, thus impacting availability in traditional fishing grounds off the Irish coast. This shift has led Patrick Murphy, the chief executive of the Irish South and West Fish Producers Organisation, to call for comprehensive scientific assessments of sprat to inform more sustainable fishing policies.

Concerns over the ecological ramifications of current fishing methods are not new. Investigative reports have indicated that Ireland has exceeded scientific advice regarding fish catches, with bottom trawling being a prevalent technique among Irish vessels. A study revealed that, in 2020 alone, Ireland overfished by 7,300 tonnes, positioning it among the top nations for overfishing within Europe. This unsustainable approach raises alarms about the long-term viability of essential marine species, including sprats, which underpin the ecosystem.

Amid the distressing reports of declining marine life, there remains a glimmer of hope; sightings of endangered species such as the North Atlantic right whale have recently been reported off the Irish coast, suggesting that conservation efforts could yield positive outcomes if implemented effectively. Nonetheless, the path forward must involve a concerted effort to balance ecological preservation with the needs of local fisheries and marine tourism, creating a sustainable framework that benefits both wildlife and community stakeholders. As the demand for fishmeal grows with the expansion of aquaculture, the need for responsible management practices becomes increasingly urgent, lest we witness further irreversible losses in our marine ecosystems.

## 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), [[3]](https://www.irishexaminer.com/business/companies/arid-41244907.html), [[5]](https://www.thejournal.ie/net-loss-pt3-fishing-industry-transparency-5402003-Apr2021/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.irishexaminer.com/business/companies/arid-41244907.html), [[4]](https://www.southernstar.ie/premium-exclusives/claims-that-inshore-trawling-is-leaving-local-waters-void-of-life-4310131)
* Paragraph 4 – [[5]](https://www.thejournal.ie/net-loss-pt3-fishing-industry-transparency-5402003-Apr2021/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[6]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/article/2024/jul/17/north-atlantic-right-whale-seen-off-ireland-for-first-time-in-114-years)
* Paragraph 6 – [[4]](https://www.southernstar.ie/premium-exclusives/claims-that-inshore-trawling-is-leaving-local-waters-void-of-life-4310131)

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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> - Cork Whale Watch, a whale-watching company in Unionhall, Ireland, has ceased operations, citing overfishing of sprat disrupting the marine food chain and causing whales and dolphins to relocate. The company, which had been operating for 25 years, now reports sightings of only a few minke whales and small groups of dolphins. The closure has sparked public outcry and prompted government promises to protect fish stocks and marine biodiversity.
3. <https://www.irishexaminer.com/business/companies/arid-41244907.html> - Mark and Patricia Gannon, operators of Atlantic Whale and Wildlife Tours in West Cork, are facing challenges due to rising food and fuel costs. Despite these difficulties, they continue to offer whale-watching tours, though sightings have decreased compared to previous years. The Gannons express concern over the impact of high fuel prices and geopolitical tensions on their business. ([irishexaminer.com](https://www.irishexaminer.com/business/companies/arid-41244907.html?utm_source=openai))
4. <https://www.southernstar.ie/premium-exclusives/claims-that-inshore-trawling-is-leaving-local-waters-void-of-life-4310131> - Environmentalists in West Cork claim that inshore trawling is depleting vital forage species like sprat and sand eels, leading to a decline in whale sightings. They warn that current fishing practices could result in the disappearance of these species from local waters, affecting marine ecosystems and the local economy. ([southernstar.ie](https://www.southernstar.ie/premium-exclusives/claims-that-inshore-trawling-is-leaving-local-waters-void-of-life-4310131?utm_source=openai))
5. <https://www.thejournal.ie/net-loss-pt3-fishing-industry-transparency-5402003-Apr2021/> - An investigation reveals that Ireland has exceeded scientific advice on overfishing, with bottom trawling being the most common method used by Irish vessels. The New Economics Foundation found that Ireland overfished by 7,300 tonnes in 2020, placing it fourth on the overfishing league table. The report also highlights issues with enforcement and transparency in the fishing industry. ([thejournal.ie](https://www.thejournal.ie/net-loss-pt3-fishing-industry-transparency-5402003-Apr2021/?utm_source=openai))
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/article/2024/jul/17/north-atlantic-right-whale-seen-off-ireland-for-first-time-in-114-years> - A critically endangered North Atlantic right whale was spotted off the coast of Ireland for the first time in over a century. The sighting, made by a holidaymaker in County Donegal, provides a glimmer of hope for the species, which has fewer than 400 individuals remaining. The whale was observed for about an hour in McSwynes Bay. ([theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/article/2024/jul/17/north-atlantic-right-whale-seen-off-ireland-for-first-time-in-114-years?utm_source=openai))
7. <https://www.orcaireland.org/conservation> - ORCAIreland focuses on marine conservation, highlighting human impacts on the marine environment, including pollution and disturbance from human activities. Irish waters have been legally protected as a 'Whale and Dolphin Sanctuary' since 1991, with regulations prohibiting the disturbance of cetacean species. However, challenges remain in protecting marine wildlife from various human-induced threats. ([orcaireland.org](https://www.orcaireland.org/conservation?utm_source=openai))