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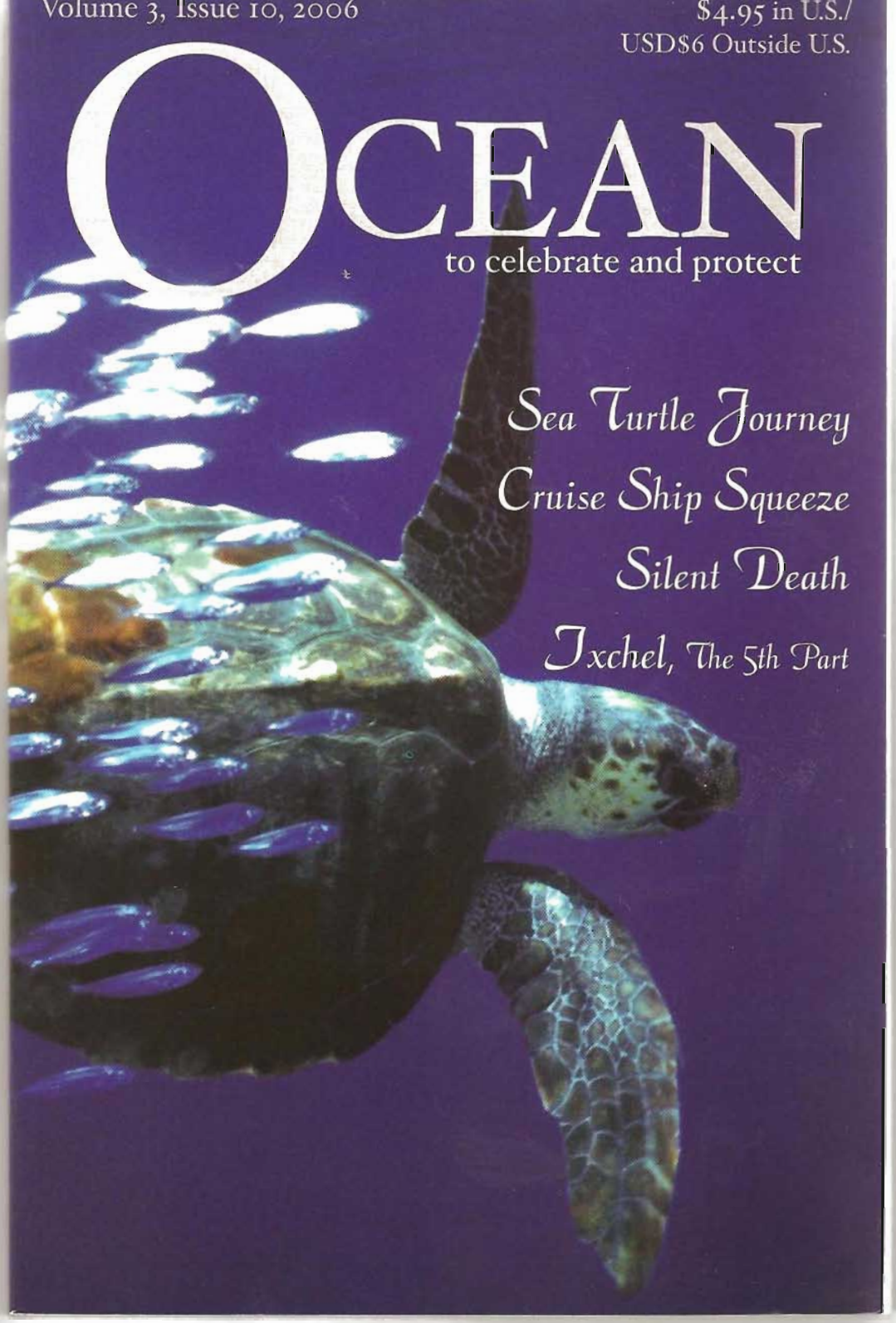

Sea Turtle Journey

Cruise Ship Squeeze

Silent Death

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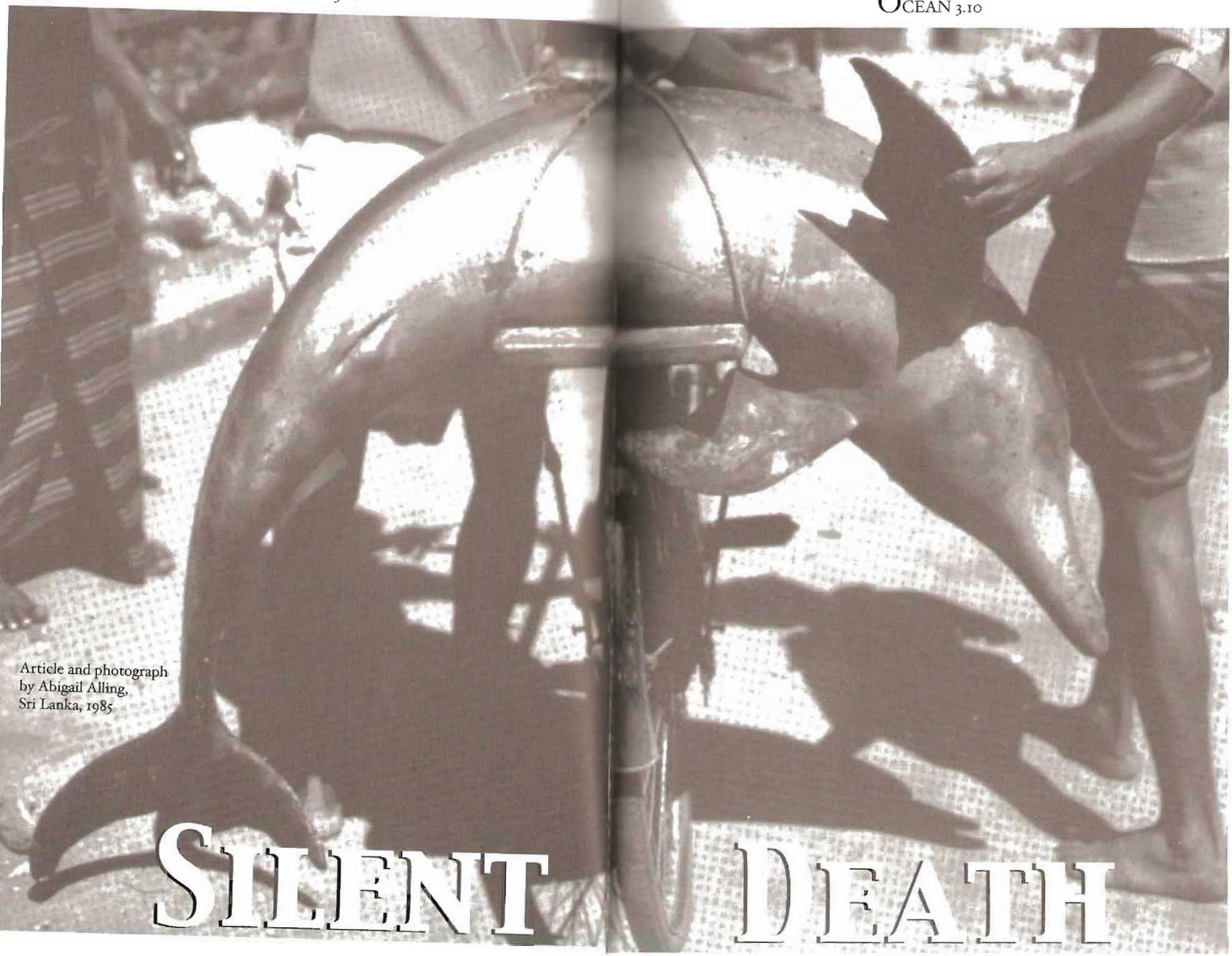

Article and photograph
by Abigail Alling,
Sri Lanka, 1985

SILENT DEATH

It was just light as I left the dirt road and made my way towards the water's edge where fishermen were milling. Silhouetted against a pale orange horizon, these slim figures faced out towards the Indian Ocean and a harbor where a few boats were moored. As I walked closer, a small thirty-foot boat rounded a stone jetty which separated the ocean from a chorus of exchanges between the crowd and men on the vessel. An old outrigger, sewn together with hemp, glided from the shore to greet this brightly colored three and a half-ton vessel. The men seemed in good cheer. Their night's work of setting and hauling driftnets must have been successful.

Already other boats had returned in the dark and on the shore lay yellowfin and skipjack tuna, bonito, and shark. A circle of men surrounded the neatly assembled pile and a caller crisply hurried the exchange between fishermen and buyers. As the commotion increased with the rising sun, I turned my back to their activities and watched the outrigger come alongside to the vessel.

The outrigger with its runner deployed out to the side looked particularly odd. Sticking out of its narrow cockpit at different angles curved two large tails. "Sharks" I thought to myself as I watched it approach the shore. Within minutes her bow touched the sand and the tails were hauled up and out. With a splash they hit the shallow water and were dragged up the bank. A wave of recognition, then disbelief. I ran towards the large animals and looked down quietly at a female bottlenose dolphin. The world closed around me, the voices receded, the animal was dead. I had never seen a dolphin in its entirety so close before. She was about my size.

The blade came down with a thud. I heard the blow and watched the red stain her mottle, light belly. The liquid ran along her body, back towards the sea. The knife slid from the throat to tail, exposing her intestines and a tiny fetus. Again the flash of metal and the two were separated. I knelt down to reach the perfect, opaque fetus and remove it from the steel blade. Its skin was so thin that I could almost see inside the dolphin and through its tiny tail and fin. Its warm perfection staggered me.

Within five minutes the two adult dolphins were sold to a buyer who sent one draped over the back of a bicycle to a town in the north. The other dolphin was dispatched south in chunks, iced in a box in the back of a truck.

I had found the fish market in the town of Beruwala, Sri Lanka. (Beruwala is a small village on the west coast, approximately twenty-eight miles south of the capital, Colombo.) Here three and a half- and seventeen and a half-ton boats set synthetic gillnets about fifteen miles off the coast to catch pelagic fish.

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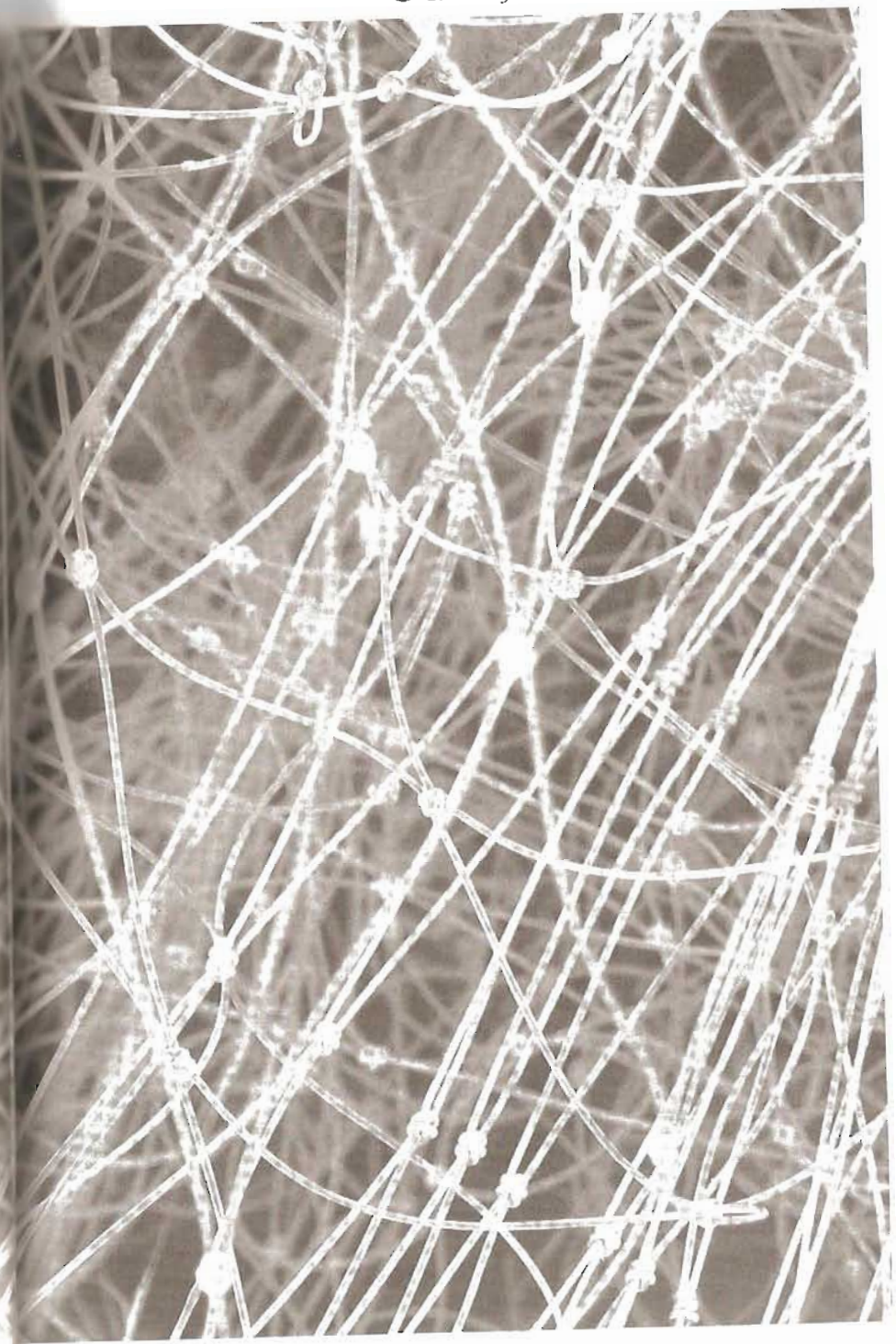

Essentially these nets are visually and acoustically undetectable to small cetaceans and their plastic synthetic fibers are unbreakable, which prevents animals from escaping once caught. In addition, the magnitude of the net often makes it impossible for an entangled small dolphin to surface with the weight of it, so it drowns.

By monitoring the daily take of dolphins in three harbors for three years from 1982 to 1984, I have estimated that over 38,000 dolphins may be taken annually in Sri Lanka. This by-catch involves largely spinner, Risso, and spotted dolphins, but I have seen at least thirteen species and heard about larger whales and dugongs reported entangled as well. However, as staggering as it seems, this estimate may be conservative because it represents only a fraction of the problem. Gillnets, which are set from larger trawling vessels that work offshore for extended periods of time, also take an unknown but perhaps significant number of dolphins. And, it is not known what percent of entangled dolphins are lost at sea, eaten by sharks, or left disabled. In the meantime, the results of this preliminary study carry a grave message: coastal gillnet fisheries operate in all oceans. This by-catch occurs undetected and unrecorded, and it is decimating populations of keystone predators such as dolphins, sharks, and turtles.

Today, the majority of fishermen use synthetic gillnets worldwide and although my observations occurred only along the coast of Sri Lanka, it is devastingly clear that populations of small cetaceans are threatened, endangered, or at least harassed by gillnet fisheries wherever the nets and cetaceans inhabit the same waters. Gillnets have been used by fishermen for centuries, but apparently it has not been until the last thirty years that the incidental entrapment and entanglement of small cetaceans in nets, untended and tended, has been extensive enough to be of serious concern. Gear modifications, technical advances, and increases in the number of boats harvesting fish have been primary causes of this recent and excessive entanglement of animals. In particular, the replacement of cotton nets with synthetic nets in the 1950s marked the beginning of an untold harvest of both commercial fish, and other species. Tragically there is no existing legislative, administrative, biological, or technical means to prevent such blind decimation locally or globally.

Cetaceans are a common property resource and exploitation of them is of interest to both coastal and international fisheries. (In Sri Lanka, where conservation has been an important component of Buddhism for centuries, this incidental catch is largely unwelcome to the fishermen.) Isolated attempts by coastal states to manage or protect marine mammals in their waters will ultimately

falter if they remain provincial because migratory animals cannot be partitioned into discrete, man-defined boundaries. Since the entrapment of small cetaceans in gillnets occurs globally, international support must be given to address the problem. Either fishermen should be provided with alternative gear, or devices which will enable small cetaceans to sense the nets should be incorporated into the synthetic webbing.

The need to respond to this crisis is real and the impact of gillnet fisheries worldwide can no longer be denied. Yet, the facts are being ignored and silenced by traditional views upheld by economic arguments. Life in our oceans is at risk and if we do not change the current practice of using synthetic gillnets, we will eliminate the very beings we love.

From the Author: First writing this in the spring of 1985, I submitted this article to several magazines that rejected it for publication.

Since 1985, Warnasooriya Patabandige Thungaprema and Warnakulasooriya Patabandige Mahendra continue to monitor the by-catch of cetaceans in Sri Lanka. They reported in personal communication to me in 2004 that dolphins are no longer seen in the fish markets even though the number of boats using synthetic gillnets along the coast of Sri Lanka has only increased.

Dolphins came ashore in large numbers, entrapped in fishermen's nets, as caught in this 1920s photograph taken along the United States southeastern Atlantic coast.