

**ADVISORY
REPORT****navigating Through
A Gillnet Fleet**Jim Humphreys **CIRCULATING COPY**
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WASHINGTON SEA GRANT MARINE ADVISORY SERVICES

From mid-summer through Thanksgiving, a group of commercial fishermen in Puget Sound and the San Juan Islands are usually very busy trying to catch salmon with commercial gillnets. Because these fishermen work mainly at night, the boater must exercise extreme caution when navigating these waters during the gillnet fishing season.

Hitting a gillnet can cause extensive damage to a vessel as well as the net, and if a boat damages a legally marked gillnet, the boater may be financially liable for the damage. New gillnets cost up to \$8000!

What is a gillnet?

A gillnet is a type of net that is designed to float in the water from the surface to a depth of 80 feet. Gillnets that are fished in Puget Sound waters are usually 1800 feet long. The top of the net consists of a rope with corks attached every 3 to 5 feet. This rope is called the corkline. The bottom of the net is also a rope, but it is lead-filled so that it will sink. This rope is called the leadline. In between the corkline and the leadline is very lightweight nylon webbing that has been manufactured into diamond-shaped openings that are 4 to 8 inches long. When salmon swim into these openings, they cannot back out because their gills act like barbs on fishing hooks.

What does a gillnet look like in water?

To recognize a gillnet while it is being fished requires patience, good eyesight, and cooperation between the boater and the fishermen. A legally marked gillnet will be

- o 1800 feet long
- o the end of the net will be marked with a white light, called a jacklight
- o the boat fishing the net will display a red light over a white light.

The boat will not display other lights while fishing, but usually will have several bright spotlights turned on to illuminate the working area in either the stern or bow of the boat. The jacklight end of the gillnet will also have a large colored buoy attached, but that buoy is not legally required.

Generally, a gillnet will be set by the fishermen in somewhat of a straight line perpendicular to the tidal flow, and the boat will be attached to the downwind end of the net. The nets usually are set in water deeper than 50 feet. Once the net is in the water, the fisherman will allow it to drift for 1 to 2 hours. Occasionally, the fisherman may check his net by running along side it, and when he is doing that, both ends of the net will be marked with white-lighted jacklights. Under normal circumstances only one end will be marked with the jacklight, and the other end will be attached to the boat. Under these conditions you can expect to see the red over white light on the boat, the white jacklight at the end of the net, and depending upon light conditions, the corkline which is floating at the surface. Sometimes these markers will be difficult to see because of poor light conditions at dawn or dusk,

rough seas, or rainy and foggy weather. At night the corkline is virtually impossible to see without the aid of a spotlight.

How can a boater avoid a gillnet?

To avoid hitting a gillnet, a boater should follow a few basic guidelines.

- o If you think nets are present, slow down and then try to identify the jacklight associated with the fishing vessel.
- o Approach the fishing vessel directly. This greatly reduces the chance of hitting a net since the nets usually are set in a straight line.
- o Carry a spotlight, as this will allow you to find the corkline when you get close to it. Without a spotlight, the corkline will be virtually impossible to see at night.
- o When you get close enough to the boat to see the corkline and the lay of the net from the boat, simply run around the other end of the boat. If there are a considerable number of gillnet boats, you can avoid the nets by running from boat to boat.
- o Position someone on the bow to watch for the corkline.
- o Operate the boat from the flybridge if you have one.

NAVIGATING THROUGH A GILLNET FLEET

Carry a spotlight

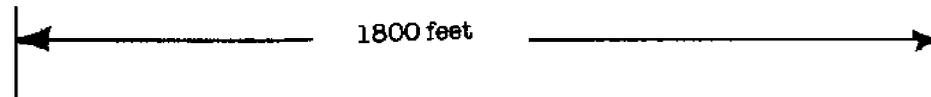
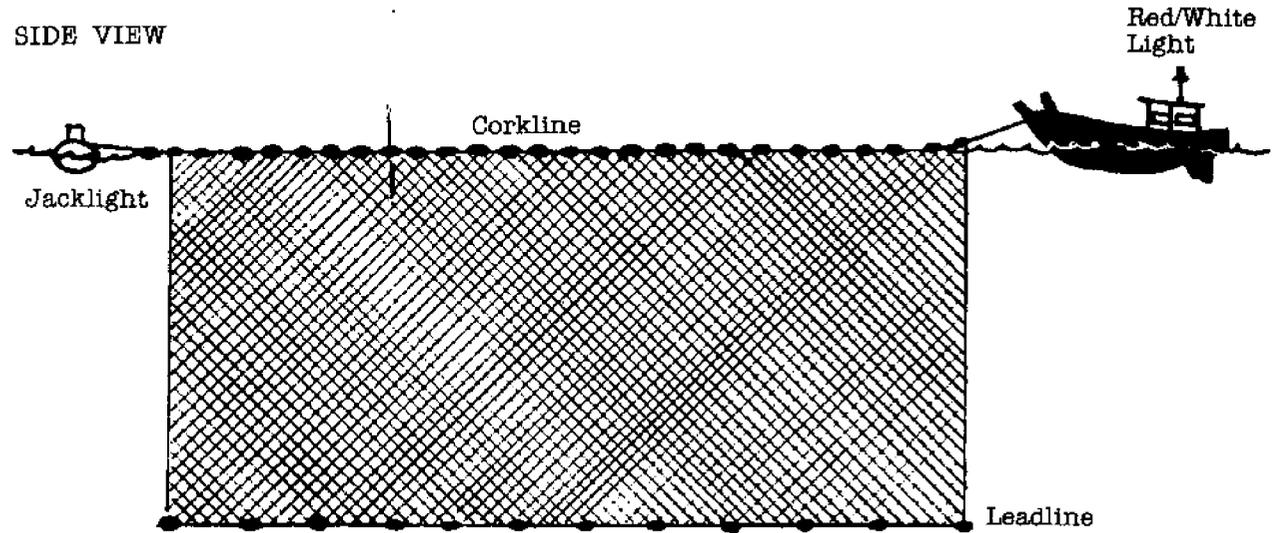
Slow down

Approach fishing
boat directly

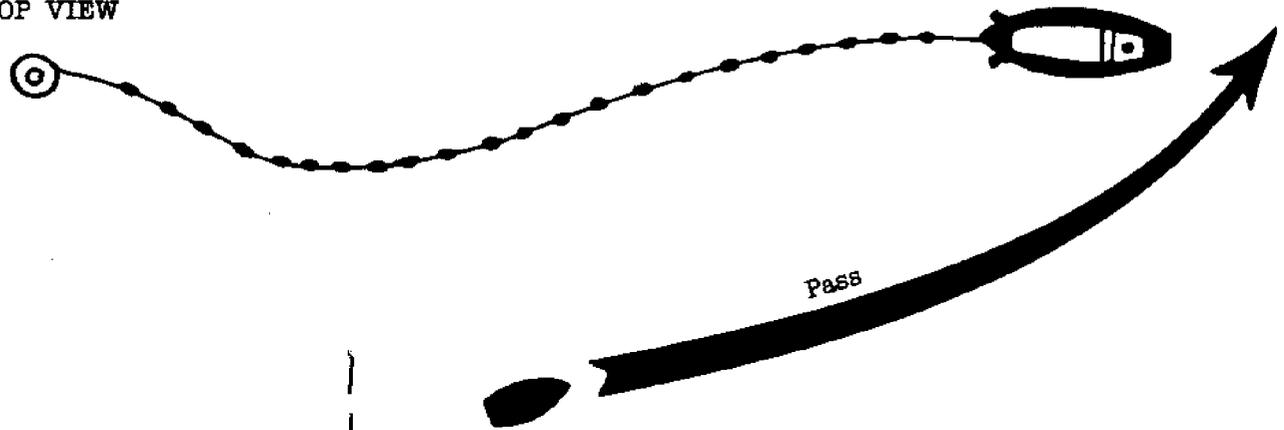
Use fly bridge

Position someone
in the bow

SIDE VIEW



TOP VIEW



How can a gillnetter help a boater avoid a gillnet?

A gillnetter can follow several basic guidelines to help other boaters to avoid his nets.

- o Mark your nets and boat properly while fishing. This not only helps the boater to see the net, but also puts the gillnetter legally in the right if his net is hit.
- o As a boat approaches your net, tighten your net to pull the corks to the surface and flash a spotlight down the net in the direction of the jacklight. This will enable the boater to find the corkline. Once the boater sees the corkline, he should signal the fisherman with a single acknowledging flash of a spotlight, running lights, or a flashlight, and then easily and safely pass around the other end of the gillnet boat.
- o If there are several nets in the area try to make radio contact with the boat to help the boater to pass safely through the fleet.
- o Use frantic or rapid flashing to tell the boater to stop immediately if his boat is about to hit or has just hit the net. A blast with a horn or siren will also help to get the boater's attention.

What if a boat hits a gillnet?

If you should hit a gillnet, remain calm and make the best of a bad situation.

- o Immediately try to get your vessel stopped by shifting into neutral. Continued running will only worsen the situation.
- o If you have net and corkline wound in your propeller, wait for the fisherman to arrive to assist you in untangling. Most fishermen have some experience in how to free net from the wheel.
- o Never enter the water to free net from your wheel, as you can easily become entangled in the net.
- o Never "blast" your way out of the net. This will only do more damage to the net, your boat and engine.
- o If damage is done, be sure to exchange names and insurance companies as that information will expedite any claims.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This leaflet was adapted from a Puget Sound Gillnetter's Association fact sheet by Bill Sibbett.

WANT MORE INFORMATION?

If you want more information about how to avoid hitting a gillnet, contact the nearest Washington Sea Grant Marine Advisory Services office.

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-- Steve Harbell
Grays Harbor Courthouse
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