

WHALE ENTRAPMENTS IN FISHING GEAR REPORTED DURING 2003 AND
A SUMMARY OF THE WHALE RELEASE AND STRANDINGS PROGRAM IN
NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR

A PRELIMINARY REPORT TO THE DEPARTMENT OF FISHERIES AND
OCEANS

by

Wayne Ledwell and Julie Huntington
Whale Release and Strandings (Tangly Whales, Inc)
244 Tolt Road
Portugal Cove-St. Philip's, NL A1M 1R2

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Summary

The Whale Release and Strandings Group, funded by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, helped fishers, who had large whales, sea turtles or basking sharks entrapped in their gear, with safe and timely assistance during 2003. Reported strandings of marine animals were responded to encouraging community involvement.

In 2003, the Whale Release and Strandings Group received calls on twelve (12) large whales that were entrapped in fishing gear (Table 1,2).

Nine humpbacks (9) were reported entrapped in fishing gear (Table 1). Two (2) of those whales were reported dead.

One minke (1) was reported entrapped (Table 2). This animal later died.

Two other unknown types of whales were reported entrapped (Table 3). One unidentified whale was cut dead from a caplin trap and the other call source and information could not be verified.

Two leatherback sea turtles (Table 3), one free-swimming and one live stranded, were reported. The live stranded sea turtle was measured, biopsied, photographed, refloated and live released by the Whale Release and Strandings Group.

Fifteen whales were reported stranded (Tables 4 and 5) or acting curiously in harbours in 2003, including a juvenile beluga and a narwhal. Individuals concerned for the safety and health of animals reported the live strandings.

Fishers at Pacquet successfully towed a large baleen whale to deeper water and it was not reported in the vicinity again. They were instructed by Whale Release and Strandings crew by phone as to how to safely move the whale to deeper water.

Stickers advertising the toll-free phone number were distributed to fishers and recreational boaters and put on display on the wharves on all visits to entrapment and stranding sites.

Assistance was provided to Claudio Corbelli, a PHD student with the Whale Research Group of Memorial University, throughout the summer for tagging and behavioral studies on humpback whales in the Witless Bay Ecological Reserve. This is part of the Whale Research Groups multi year assessment project of tour boats and their possible impact on whales.

Assistance was provided to the Department of Fisheries and Oceans to obtain a biopsy from the Conception Bay narwhal to help determine origin and population structure.

Various radio and television interviews on the Whale Release and Strandings work, including problems with the lack of response capability and the need for a program in this region, were conducted.

A stranding protocol, including standardized reporting procedures, for the region is in progress to assist with the various marine mammal strandings throughout the region.

A new cutting device was designed and manufactured to be used in instances where a long-range cutting instrument is needed for the release of whales and other entrapped or entangled marine animals.

Methods

The Whale Release and Strandings Group maintains a 24 hour a day- 7 day a week toll-free number for assistance to the fishing industry and the general public of Newfoundland and Labrador who have marine animals entrapped or entangled in fishing gear or who see stranded marine animals, including species at risk, such as the endangered leatherback sea turtle. The Department of Fisheries and Oceans funded the group during 2003. Immediate response to entrapped or stranded marine animals was provided for. Emergency response equipment, including boat, motor, vehicle and equipment necessary for the removal of animals entangled in fishing gear or other marine equipment or strandings is in ready state for deployment to any area of the region.

Discussion

The groundfishery for cod in the 2J3KL and Gulf regions was closed during 2003. This closure eliminates cod gillnets from those regions and may have resulted in a changes in numbers of large whales reported entrapped in fishing gear in Newfoundland and Labrador this year. However, the proportion of whales entrapped in gill nets compared to other fishing gear has not been high in recent years.

The Whale Release and Strandings program started to receive funding in mid-June of this year. As a result of this late start to funding two gear-entrapped whales were not attended to and fishers and community members may have been confused over the status of the disentanglement program. One entrapped

whale was a humpback that towed away the gear and the other was a minke whale, which drowned in a boat mooring lines due to late response.

At Port aux Choix on the Northern Peninsula, one humpback was released from crab and whelk and lobster-fishing gear deeply embedded in its back, fin and mouth. The crab and whelk gear had fishing tags on it and the tags were traced to the Quebec Middle North Shore fishery.

A leatherback sea turtle which live stranded at Lobster Head Cove on the Northern Peninsula was successfully released by being towed out to sea (*see results Ledwell et al; Osprey 2003*). Measurements, biopsy, video and photographs of the stranded leatherback sea turtle were supplied to the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, the Nova Scotia Leatherback Turtle Working Group and the Whale Research Group of Memorial University.

A progress report was issued to the CBC 'Fisheries Broadcast' on the reinstatement of the program and the number of marine animals released to date with a comparison to last year's program. Radio and television interviews were carried on the live release of a leatherback sea turtle on Thanksgiving weekend.

At each entrapment or stranding site the release team discussed species biology and population densities of various marine mammals and sea turtles inhabiting the waters of our region with fishers and members of the public. Continued interaction with commercial fishers continues to be the best source of information on entrapped or stranded or curiously acting marine animals. Without this community stewardship safe and timely release of entrapped or stranded animals will not occur.

Six thousand toll-free phone number stickers advertising the Whale Release and Strandings Program were sent to fishers, Coast Guard Auxiliary members and harbour authorities advertising the assistance program.

A solitary social narwhal spent the spring on the West Side of Conception Bay. Sightings of the whale occurred close to icebergs in the area. This narwhal was attracted to boat propellers, continually chasing boats and placing itself under the transoms. Mariners in the area were asked to be on the lookout for fear of injuring the animal. A boat propeller eventually cut it but a later sighting showed the narwhal appeared to have overcome the injury.

A juvenile beluga whale was observed in Pollards Arm of White Bay. This animal would not be considered social.

Throughout the year we assisted various communities with the removal of dead stranded whales.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Dr. Catherine Hood of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans for her efforts in keeping this program accessible to fishers who have problems with large whales and other marine animals entrapped in their fishing gear. Thanks are also due to the Canadian Coast Guard Traffic Center for relaying messages from fishers and the general public concerning gear entrapped or stranded marine animals and for the use of an outboard to run the inflatable boat. The assistance of Dr. Jon Lien while driving a sperm whale out of Fermeuse and all other help throughout the year was appreciated. The fishers around the region who assisted with reporting and disentangling whales, the community of Norris Point-Rocky Harbour area for their help releasing the leatherback sea turtle and Dr. Jack Lawson of DFO and many others to whom the program would not be possible.

Table 1. Humpback whale entrapments in fishing gear in Newfoundland and Labrador during 2003

Date	Area	Gear Type	Description
9 June	St. Anthony	Fishing balloons and rope	Towing gear. Funding unavailable to respond.
24 June	Change Islands	Flounder gill nets	Dead floating
27 June	Port aux Choix, Northern Peninsula	Crab, whelk and lobster	Released alive
29 June	Daniel's Harbour	Lobster	Released alive
8 July	Easter'd Tickle, Fogo	Herring nets	Dead
12 July	2 miles west Cape St. Francis, Conception Bay	Crab pots	Reported alive entangled at the surface. Could not relocate.
13 July	Witless Bay	Balloons and rope	Towing gear. Reported by tour boat. Could not relocate.
21 July	47° 49.9 N 53° 04.8 W Conception Bay	Crab gear	Reported entangled by Coast Guard helicopter. Could not relocate.
17 August	St. Pierre Bank	Large fishing balloons and rope	Towing gear, could not relocate.

Table 2. Other large whales entangled in fishing gear in Newfoundland and Labrador during 2003

Date	Area	Gear type	Description
12 June	Cape Broyle	Boat mooring	Minke dead. Late response due to no funding.
8 July	Tors Cove	Unknown	Free swimming whale reported entrapped to Whale Research Group. Checked the area but could not find animal.
7 August	Chapel Arm	Caplin Trap	Dead. Cut from trap.

Table 3. Leatherback turtle strandings and sightings reported in Newfoundland and Labrador during 2003

Date	Area	Description
4 September	St. Anthony	Free swimming.
10-13 October	Lobster Head Cove, Northern Peninsula 41 36.50N, 4757.40W	Stranded, refloated and released alive. Water temps 12-14oC

Table 4. Stranded cetaceans reported in Newfoundland and Labrador during 2003

Date	Area	Species	Description
26 June	West Bay, Port au Port Peninsula	Minke	Severely decomposed. Examined by W. Ledwell
29 June	Bay De Verde	Humpback	Dead and drifting.
4 July	Hynes Cove, Port au Port Peninsula	Sperm	Severely decomposed. Examined by Fisheries Officer.
30 July	Back Beach, Stephenville Crossing	Long-finned pilot	Dead. Examined by W. Ledwell. Skeleton collected.
4 September	Blanc Sablonc	Large whale	Live stranded. Towed off beach. Disappeared.
26 September	Pacquet, White Bay	Possible minke or sei	Live stranding. Towed out to sea. No further sighting.
19 October	Cape St. Georges	Large whale spp.	Severely decomposed whale on beach in community.
7 November	Port aux Choix	Humpback	Dead stranded by French Shore Cottages

Table 5. Other cetaceans reported in Newfoundland and Labrador during 2003

Date	Area	Species	Description
9 June	Baie Verte	Unknown	Small whale swimming erratically close to shore. Disappeared.
26 June	Garnish	12-15 Long-finned pilot whales	Swimming very close to shore in shallow water.
26 June	Upper Island Cove	Narwhal	Repeated sightings of this whale interacting with boats.
24 July	Maddox Cove	Dolphin spp.	Possible bottlenose swimming close to shore.
5 August	Ferryland	Large whale spp.	Whale lobtailing and flippering for lengthy period.
11 August	Outer Cove	Large whale spp.	Whale lobtailing and flippering for lengthy period.
1 September	Sop's Arm, White Bay	Beluga	Juvenile beluga swimming erratically about Pollards Arm area.

Table 6. Seals reported in Newfoundland and Labrador during 2003

Date	Area	Species	Description
12 October	Coley's Point, Bay Roberts, Conception Bay	Harbour	Injured, eating rocks
26 October	Lance Cove, Bell Island, Conception Bay		Hauled out on beach
27 October	Flatrock		Dead on beach
31 October	Torbay		Hauled out on rocks
17 November	Quidi Vidi		Hauled out on slipway
26 November	Harbour Grace		Hauled out, plastic bag protruding from mouth
28 November	Maddox Cove		Hauled out at end of road
28 December	South Dildo		Newborn delivered on wharf