

INCIDENTAL ENTRAPMENTS IN FISHING GEAR AND STRANDINGS
REPORTED TO AND RESPONDED TO BY THE WHALE RELEASE AND
STRANDINGS GROUP IN NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR AND A
SUMMARY OF THE WHALE RELEASE AND STRANDINGS PROGRAM
DURING 2013

A Report to the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, Canada –
Newfoundland and Labrador Region

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Thanks to the Navigator magazine for running reduced fee ads advertising the toll-free number to fishers with details of whom to call when you have or see a marine animal entrapped or stranded.

The Canadian Coast Guard Marine Traffic Centers diligently report entrapped and stranded marine animals and sightings regularly to the hot line. Thanks for the service. Thank you to the Harbour Authority of St. Philip's. To the fishermen of this Region who have continued to support this program throughout its long history, the success of our work releasing entrapped animals would not be possible without your continued support and participation.

Introduction

Whale Release and Strandings Group

The Whale Release and Strandings Group (Tangly Whales Inc.) is a non-profit environmental organization responsible for the disentanglement and strandings of marine animals in Newfoundland and Labrador since 2000 and incorporated in July 2002. The organization has a board of directors. The Mission statement for the Whale Release and Strandings Group is:

- To conserve biodiversity
- To release whales from fishing gear
- To attempt to save fishing gear to the extent possible during a disentanglement
- To coordinate strandings on marine animals
- To conduct research work on marine animals
- To conduct all other work on marine animals as seen fit

From 1978 through 2013 assistance has been offered to fishers in the Newfoundland Region who incidentally have large whales, leatherback sea turtles and basking sharks entangled in their fishing gear and for live stranded marine animals. This service has been provided with cooperation from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, Canada.

During this time period information from fishers regarding whale interactions has been recorded and monitored, included in this are the incidences of entrapments, strandings and sightings of leatherback sea turtles, sharks and 20 different species of cetaceans and have been recorded in continuous reports and summaries from 1978 -2013.

The program, which has been run by the Whale Release and Strandings Group since 2001, plus providing one-year mentorship with the Canadian Coast Guard in 2000, uses methods for disentangling large whales from fishing gear, which were pioneered by Dr. Jon Lien (Lien 1980) and with a few modifications remain those of choice today.

The disentanglement program in use today was designed and developed for the highly rural nature of over 800 fishing community's spread over the 17,000 km coastline of Newfoundland and Labrador. The disentanglement assistance program has benefited fishers, whales, leatherback sea turtles and the people of Canada. It provides assistance to often financially stretched fishers, saving them thousands of dollars in what would be lost fishing gear and downtime if they did not have skilled support in releasing a large whale entrapped in their gear. It releases large and often endangered whales, leatherback sea turtles and basking shark from fishing gear and allows them to continue their life processes. We have the largest feeding population of humpbacks in the northwest Atlantic, with about 5,000 individuals visiting NL waters during spring, summer and fall. These whales are the basis for a large tourism industry in the region.

The program also responds to all reported live and dead cetaceans and sea turtles, as well as pack ice entrapments.

The purpose of the assistance is: (1) to assist fishers in releasing whales from fishing gear, thus decreasing downtime and damage to fishing gear. The length of time a large marine animal is entrapped in fishing gear is directly correlated to greater gear damage and loss of income due to the gear not fishing properly or at all (Lien 1983), (2) to release entrapped marine animals as quickly and safely as possible, (3) to communicate with fishermen and communities about marine animals, including species at risk, habitat protection, and (4) to add to the scientific knowledge of cetaceans, leatherback sea turtles and sharks that inhabit Newfoundland and Labrador waters.

Fish harvesters have come to realize that calling a government sponsored program offers them a faster and more efficient alternative to dealing with a gear-entrapped animal than attempting a release on their own. Fishers and lay people who take whales out of gear often leave large amounts of fishing gear on the animal. Whales caught in crab gear that are cut loose by fishers and other members of the public are often released with vast amounts of rope and pots still attached (Ledwell and Huntington 2001, 2002, 2006). This provides more opportunity for re-entrapment and more gear damage. A timely response by experienced personnel results in the removal of most if not all gear from the animals, less gear damage and fishing downtime, particularly important to the economically marginalized inshore fishers.

From 1979 to 2013, one thousand and sixteen (1016) humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*), one hundred and fifty eight (159) minke whales (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*), thirteen (13) fin whales (*Balaenoptera physalus*), one right whale (*eubalaena glacialis*), one bowhead whale (*balaena mysticetus*) and eighty seven (87) unknown large whales were reported entrapped in fishing gear in Newfoundland and Labrador. Entrapments and strandings of smaller cetaceans and marine animals such as leatherback sea turtles and sharks have also been reported. Entrapments, strandings and sightings of other cetaceans and marine animals such as sea turtles and sharks have also been documented (Lien 1994; Ledwell and Huntington 2000-2008). From 1992 to 2000 funding for a marine animal release program was varied and at times non-existent.

The most common types of fishing gear associated with entanglements in this region currently include gillnets (cod, herring, mackerel, lumpfish, flounder, monk, skate and turbot) snow crab pots, whelk pots, toad crab pots, box traps (caplin, cod, herring, mackerel and squid), unspecified and illegal gillnets, ropes/buoys and moorings. In other words, most types of fishing gear have the potential to incidentally catch whales and they do. In recent years fishing effort in Newfoundland and Labrador has shifted offshore. This shift in gear has led to an

increase in the number of offshore entrapments reported and offshore entanglements have primarily involved snow crab and whelk pot gear.

Methods

Whale, leatherback sea turtle and basking shark entanglements in fishing gear and strandings and sightings of marine animals were reported to the Whale Release and Strandings Program in 2013 by calling an advertised toll free number (1-888-895-3003) which can be accessed 24 hours a day seven days a week. A trained release team responds by providing suitable, safe advice or sending expert personnel to the site for needed assistance. The trained crew is equipped and ready to deploy immediately with an inflatable zodiac and necessary specialized tools for disentanglement of whales, leatherback sea turtles and basking sharks. The objective of each disentanglement is the safe, clean release of the whale or other marine animals from the fishing gear and minimal or no damage to the fishing gear involved in the entanglement. The disentanglement crew also responded to whale and leatherback sea turtle strandings. Calls concerning entanglements, strandings and dead floating animals were also forwarded to the group by DFO Conservation Officers, Coast Guard Centers, fishers, Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), Crime Stoppers and the general public. Fisheries and Oceans Canada funded the program in 2013. Additional funding was provided through the Provincial Student Work and Services Program (SWASP) and the community of Portugal Cove-St. Philip's.

Results and Discussion

Results of the Entrapment Assistance Program from previous years have been summarized in annual reports to Fisheries and Oceans and the Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Fisheries (Lien 1980; Lien and Aldrich 1982; Lien et al. 1982; 1983; 1984; 1985; 1986; 1987; 1988; 1989; Lien 1990; 1991; 1992; 1993; 1994, 1995, 1996, Ledwell, Huntington and Lien 2000, Ledwell and Huntington 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, Ledwell, Huntington and Nick Kelly 2010 and Ledwell and Huntington 2011, 2012).

Humpback Whales

Sixteen (17) humpbacks were reported to the Whale Release and Strandings Group in 2013 (Table 1). Two of those animals were caught in offshore snow crab gear and both were released with large amounts of heavy poly steel rope and large poly buoys. This is not uncommon, as fishers cannot handle the animals themselves in longliners and mostly haul close to the animals and cut them loose when the crew becomes scared. There has been consistent reporting of fishermen cutting large whales loose from snow and whelk pot crab gear with large amounts of heavy poly steel rope, poly floats and staff buoys, crab and whelk pots still attached (Ledwell and Huntington 2001-2012)

Two animals were entangled in herring nets before a program to release them was in place and Fisheries Officers released one of those although the animal was let go with some gear on it.

Between the 25th and the 1st of July three humpbacks were entangled in caplin traps belonging to the same fisherman. Two of those entanglements were in the same trap with the first animal taking the whole frame, rope, poly buoys anchors and towing it away. A large humpback towing a large amount of gear and accompanied by a calf with similar gear as from this trap was reported on the 26th July could possibly be this same animal. The same fisherman had a humpback entangled on the first of July while hauling his trap in an adjacent community. His reported entrapments were in the only two caplin traps out in this area and in 7 days he had 3 humpbacks caught.

Between the 17th to the 23rd of July the Whale Release and Strandings group attempted to intercept and remove twine that was around the head and through the mouth of a humpback in and around the Witless Bay Ecological Reserve. We were unsuccessful in grappling the single string of twine that extended to mid body.

Turr hunters spotted a large blue poly buoy on 30 November with over 300 meters rope trailing. The gear was barnacle encrusted. While pulling it aboard they saw that it was entangled around a large whale. The whale rolled away from them with its pectoral fin in the air above their heads. They saw 3 other smaller poly buoys attached to the whale with rope around the tail and pectoral fin. They realized how lucky they were not to have been capsized. A Notice to Mariners was put out for safety, DF0 Twillingate were alerted for searching.

Other entangled humpbacks were entangled in a variety of ropes and nets and one in a mackerel trap.

Minke whales

One minke whale was reported entangled in a boat/dock mooring in April. This animal was feeding on herring, which were plentiful in the bay at the time.

Other entrapped whales

The Whale Release and Strandings Group were called on to provide advice on three notable and severe entanglements both nationally and internationally in 2013 (Table 3). A fin whale known for its regular appearance in the Saguenay-St. Lawrence Marine Park with a large snow crab pot on top of its rostrum with ropes through its mouth and undisclosed trailing gear stayed in the area for a week with disentanglement attempts unsuccessful from Parks Canada. Advice was sought from the Whale Release and Strandings Group and the Group was on alert for a proposed disentanglement attempt. Unfortunately the whale disappeared and has not been relocated.

As part of the International Whaling Commission's Global Whale Entanglement Response Network <http://iwc.int/entanglement-response-network> whose mandate is to provide training and safe disentanglement of large whales the group was on alert for a possible disentanglement attempt of a critically endangered western grey whale off the Sakhalin Islands, Russia. A rescue attempt by members of this group including Mr. Ledwell was planned but unfortunately the whale was not relocated.

As part of the above group advice was sought on a distressing entanglement in Guadeloupe in the French Caribbean where a mother sperm whale was entangled in and towing its dead calf in the same gear. Rescue attempts were unsuccessful and advice was sought by members of the group including the Whale Release and Strandings Group on experience from their individual groups on methods of disentangling the animal.

Leatherback sea turtles

Two (2) leatherback sea turtles were released from gear in 2013 and reported to the Whale Release and Strandings Group (Table 4). One was released gear free by a longliner crew entangled in snow crab gear. The second animal was released gear free from a mussel farm in northeastern Newfoundland by recreational boaters. This is the same farm and area where a leatherback died in mussel gear in 2009 (Ledwell and Huntington 2009).

Six (6) leatherbacks were reported free swimming to the Whale Release and Strandings Group in 2013 (Table 5). One of those was reported to be rubbing against the boat, as if it was trying to come aboard. Interestingly we have had several similar reports over the years

Strandings

A Green Sea Turtle was discovered dead in Terrenceville on November 19th. Tracks were found where the turtle had crawled ashore. This is the first record of this species in the Newfoundland and Labrador region.

A 760 cm female minke came ashore in Lewisporte on the North East Coast the early morning of 15 November (Table 6). WRS were alerted at 3 a.m. The whale died shortly afterwards and was necropsied by members of the Whale Release and Strandings Group, a large animal provincial veterinarian and Lewisporte town workers. Inspection of the animal's gut showed that it was not eating, as it was empty. The whale skeleton was retrieved for display by the town.

A 20-meter fin whale lodged under the Argentinia to North Sydney ferry wharf caused quite a bit of commotion as to disposal options and stink. Members of the Whale Release and Strandings Group were called for advice on disposal. In our opinion the only way the animal could have gotten in there was after been carried in on the bow of either the ferry or another large vessel and while supple was

driven under the pier from the engines of the ship and when the gasses heated up the animal straightened itself throughout the piers. The only way to get it out was to cut in in various sections and it was suggested by us to leave it as the area was a safe place for it to break down naturally under a periodically used wharf separated from a community. That advice was accepted.

Miscellaneous cetacean and other animal sightings

Three (3) free-swimming blue whales were sighted by the Whale Release and Strandings Group in 2013 (Table 7). The first was sighted lunge feeding in Trinity Bay. A member of the Group while en route from the Gulf of St. Lawrence to Milne Inlet Baffin Bay sighted the other two animals.

Education activities

Stickers advertising the assistance program were sent to all Harbour Authorities, all DFO, Canadian Coast Guard, Crime Stoppers, coastal municipal, SPCA, Humane Society, media outlets and outdoor marine adventure companies throughout the region as well as to groups and fishers who requested them. An ad was also placed throughout the year in the fisheries trade magazine – The Navigator.

The Whale Release and Strandings Group helped organize the third “whale days” at Cape Spear and participated by displaying a full minke whale skeleton and life size humpback canvas rollout as part of their “bones, barnacles and baleen” educational presentations. The event was highly successful. The Group also carried out various presentations to kids in the St. John’s area with the “bones, barnacles and baleen” theme.

Recommendation 1. Funding agreements should be in place and funds available before entrapment season begins. Agreements need to be established that are assurances to provide support to an organized programme over a period of years. Programmes that do not have these assurances will be very difficult to maintain and staff on an on-going basis (Lien 2004).

Recommendation 2. All vessels in the Newfoundland region should have the toll free number stickers onboard alerting them who to call when they have an entrapped whale or see an entrapped whale or leatherback sea turtle. By having the toll free number visible in the wheelhouse fishers may decide to call for expert advice when they have or see a whale or leatherback entrapped and not attempt to cut animals free and leave them with large amounts of gear attached which may cause the animal to die or become re-entrapped. This situation can be at least partially avoided if boats have the entrapment assistance hot line number easily visible onboard and upon calling can be advised on the proper release procedures or be advised that a release team is available to attend to the entanglement. This may lessen the number of whales or sea turtles each season swimming around with large amounts of snow crab and other gear attached. See Appendix I for toll-free sticker.

Table 1. Humpback whales reported entangled in fishing gear in Newfoundland and Labrador during 2013

Date	Area	Gear type	Description
10 April	Portugal Cove north	Herring net	Whale self-release from the net. Whale towing a fishing balloon and some rope. No program in place to respond and whale was not re sighted in area again. DFO searched area evening of 10 th with no resighting
21 May	Ship Harbour Placentia Bay	Herring net	WRG was on standby to help but there was no contract in place. Fisheries officers released the whale (without looking under water) with “probably still gear on it”
29 May	20 NM off Cape Race 46 41N, 52 59W	Snow crab	Whale busted free while crew trying to retrieve gear. Crew was frightened as whale began towing boat. Whale towing staff balloon and tagging balloon with about 50 meters new 9/16” polysteel rope
19 June	Downing Basin, Grand Banks 47 07.5N, 50 59W	Snow crab	Fishermen cut whale loose and it was left towing 9/16” polysteel rope haul-up rope and 2 large floats
26 June	Cape Ballard Bank 46 54.95N, 52 55.39W	Unknown	Large humpback towing 2 large fishing balloons. Calf with the animal. Whale swimming to the souther’d. Late evening, weather foggy
25 June	Jobs Cove, Conception Bay	Caplin Trap	Large humpback took the whole frame of the trap including 3 new 60”, poly buoys, and all rope and 3x 100 lb. grapnels. This may have been the whale sighted on the 26 th June of above
30 June	Jobs Cove, Conception Bay	Caplin Trap	Whale entangled in doorways and reported late evening. WRS left and was on site at daylight on 1 st July. Whale had broken out, Small amount of damage to trap
1 July	Western Bay	Caplin Trap	Entangled in leader while hauling trap. Fisherman calls us as we were in Jobs Cove trying to find the 30 th June animal. Whale self released from leader before we got there

7 July	Bellevue beach Trinity Bay	Unidentified	Recreational boaters watched the animal get caught in what they thought was scientific gear. Whale busted free towing a small float. WRS geared up to go but they lost sight of the whale
9 July	Trinity	Small float, rope and part of what looked an old wooden crate	Reported by Sea of Whales Tours. We searched the area for 4 hours and couldn't find the whale
11 July	South East Bight, Placentia Bay 47 21N, 54 32W	Cod gillnets	Fishermen took one of the two cod nets off the whale. WRS responded. Strong winds for rest of 11 th and all day 12 th . Search for whale from 0530 on 13 th proved negative
17 July	Witless Bay Ecological Reserve	Large mesh twine	Repeated attempts by the WRS from 17-23 July to try and catch whale. Animal had mesh in its mouth with very slight leading twine that we were unable to grapple. Twine cutting from barnacles
1 August	Terrenceville Fortune Bay	Gill nets	Whale towing gear out the bay. Gear later found intact
1 August	Upper Gullies Conception Bay	Rope	Whale reported towing gear. WRS searched area but couldn't find the animal
4 August	Petty Harbour	Rope	Single rope trailing behind head. Maybe the same animal from 17 July
7 August	Raleigh, Great Northern Peninsula	Mackerel trap	WRS responded but locals cut animal out leaving gear on the whale before WRS got there
30 Nov	Change Islands, Notre Dame Bay	Large 40" blue poly buoy and 3 smaller poly buoys, more than 300 meters 9/16" poly steel rope	Whale towing gear reported by turr hunters

Table 2. Minke whales reported entangled in fishing gear in Newfoundland and Labrador during 2013

Date	Area	Gear type	Description
31 March	Bay L'Argent Fortune Bay	Boat mooring	Released alive and gear free by fisherman. Minkes in the area feeding on herring

Table 3. Other large whales reported entangled in fishing gear to the Whale Release and Strandings Group in 2013

Date	Area	Gear type	Description
7-16 June	Saguenay- St. Lawrence Marine Park	Snow crab	Fin whale with large snow crab pot on top of head. W. Ledwell advised with other large whales disentanglement groups (PCCS, DFO B,C) and on alert for response. Animal disappeared
26 August	Off Sakhalin Island-Russia	Gill netting	Highly endangered western grey whale. IWC large whale disentanglement Group put on alert for advice and response
15 Nov	Guadeloupe-French Caribbean	Gillnetting	Sperm whale entangled through mouth while towing its dead calf entangled in same gear. IWC large whale disentanglement activated for advice on disentangling the animal. Ongoing

Table 4. Leatherback sea turtles reported entrapped in fishing gear in Newfoundland and Labrador during 2013

Date	Area	Description
13 July	12nm miles south east off Fermuese Southern Shore	Released alive and gear free from snow crab gear. Animal was caught around neck and front right flipper at the buoy. Video sent
25 August	Pleasantview Notre Dame Bay	Released alive from mussel farm. Animal heavily entangled around head and both front flippers. Video sent

Table 5. Leatherback sea turtle sightings reported in Newfoundland and Labrador during 2013

Date	Area	Description
22 July	Long Reach Island	Free swimming

	Bonavista Bay 48 43.28N, 53 48.91W	
4 August	Eastern entrance to Change Islands, Notre Dame Bay 49 43.27N, 54 21.25W	Free swimming
5 August	Twillingate Notre Dame Bay. 49 41.34N, 54 49.97W	Free swimming
7 August	Red Island Placentia Bay	Animal rubbing against boat “couldn’t start up engine for fear of hitting it, seemed like he wanted to come aboard” I have heard similar stories of encounters with leatherbacks
11 September	3nm south off Petty harbor, Southern Shore	Free swimming
19 September	16 nm south east Petty Harbour, Southern Shore	Free swimming

Table 6. Stranded and dead floating cetaceans reported in Newfoundland and Labrador during 2013

Date	Area	Species	Description
3 April	Bay L’Argent	Harbour Porpoise	2 dead in Barrasway. Assumed feeding at high tide and trapped
28 May	Upper Island Cove Conception Bay	Minke	Dead floating ~8 meters. No response from WRG or anyone as no contract in place. Animal identified through pictures as freshly dead. No sign of gear on animal
29 May	Lumsden, Trinity Bay	Unknown large whale sp;	~15 m whale dead floating in position 49 27.1N. 53 35.6W
18 July	Angels Cove, Placentia Bay	Long fin pilot	Adult animal dead for couple weeks on beach
23 July	Patrick’s Cove Placentia Bay	Harbour Porpoise	Dead on beach. Picture sent
25 July	Codroy river, west coast	Sperm	In mouth of river, long dead with large circular shark bites out of body

29 July	Argentia, Placentia Bay	Beluga	Adult animal dead couple weeks
4 August	Witless Bay Southern Shore	Humpback	Small humpback dead drifting in cove. Couldn't relocate
10 August	Witless Bay Southern Shore	Pilot whale	Long dead on beach
16 August	Under Argentia ferry wharf	Fin whale	Dead. Suspect brought in on ship's bow while fresh and rose under wharf where it became stuck. Decision to leave it there
9 November	Lewsiporte, Notre Dame Bay	minke	760 cm female minke live stranded and died shortly after. Whale necropsied by members of WRS and NL provincial veterinarian

Table 7. Miscellaneous cetaceans reported in Newfoundland and Labrador during 2013

Date	Area	Species	Description
14 March	Off Hopeall Point, Trinity bay	Blue	Lunge feeding
11 April	Cow Head, Great northern Peninsula	Beluga	Solitary juvenile ~3 meters in around wharf
25 June	Off Cape Ballard, Southern Shore	10 killer whales	Fisherman first time seeing killer whales
18 July	Botwood	Small group killer whales	In harbour
31 July	Off Anticosti Island 49 41N, 65 33W	Blue whale	Free swimming (W.L.)
1 August	52 13N, 55 20W	Blue whale	Free swimming (W.L.)

Table 8. Other marine animals reported in Newfoundland and Labrador during 2013

Date	Area	Description
8 April	Bareneed, Conception Bay	Harp seal dead on beach
28 June	Point Verde, Placentia Bay	Porbeagle shark fresh dead. Shark definned and teeth cut out
19 November	Terrenceville, Fortune Bay	Green turtle crawled ashore and died

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Appendix I

WHALE AND TURTLE NOTICE

1-888-895-3003

If you have a WHALE or TURTLE or basking shark (live or dead) caught in your fishing gear, call this toll-free number and a trained crew will respond to assist you. If you see any whales, turtles or dolphins (live or dead) on a beach, please call. Should you see any leatherback sea turtles please call.



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