

Study of dead whale may be inconclusive, scientists say

by David Stauth

NEWPORT, Ore. — It may not be possible to determine the cause of death of the gray whale that washed ashore south of Newport last weekend, officials say, due to the decomposition of the carcass and limited amounts of organ samples that could be taken.

Partly for that same reason, officials are also cautioning the public to stay away from the whale, avoid touching it and stop taking away body parts.

“We’ve had concerns because some people are touching the whale and even removing parts,” said Jim Rice, coordinator of the Marine Mammal Stranding Network operated at the Oregon State University Hatfield Marine Science Center.

“It’s a violation of the Marine Mammal Protection Act to remove any portion of a dead whale such as this,” Rice said. “But more than that, it’s a serious health concern. These are wild animals that could expose a person to a variety of bacteria, viruses or diseases. The public should treat them like you would any other wild animal, and stay away from the carcass until it is properly disposed of.”

This animal was a mature, female California gray whale, 41 feet long and about 5-10 years old, initial analysis indicates. Experts say it had already been dead for about three days when it washed ashore south of Newport Sunday morning, and is decomposing fairly rapidly.

“Because the whale may need to be moved to be disposed of, and was already in advanced decomposition, we were not able to obtain all of the organ samples that ordinarily would help us determine a cause of death,” Rice said. “We may or may not be able to make that determination, when all the work is done at the lab.”

Researchers, including six students of veterinary medicine at OSU, were able to take physical measurements; some samples of blubber to check for ingestion of environmental contaminants; gastrointestinal wall and content samples; and samples from a large, swollen, cyst-like structure on the whale’s tail that could reflect an injury or parasite. Studies of some of these samples are already under way at the OSU Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory. Examination of the gastrointestinal contents should help rule in or out the presence of domoic acid, a toxin potentially lethal to marine mammals.

Common causes of death for a mature whale include being hit by a ship, starvation, fishery entanglement or disease, Rice said. Researchers sometimes are unable to determine what caused mortality in whale deaths, he said.

The Oregon Marine Mammal Stranding Network is a collaborative volunteer effort to respond to reports of sick or dead marine mammals “ including whales, seals and sea lions “ and report data about the strandings to the National Marine Fisheries Service. It is headquartered at OSU’s Hatfield Marine Science Center and coordinated by Rice.

Partners in the network include OSU, Portland State University, the University of Oregon’s Institute for Marine Biology, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Oregon State Police, the Oregon Department of Parks and Recreation and others.

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