

Ship Report Transcript

Monday, June 3, 2024

By Joanne Rideout

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It's time for the Ship Report the show about all things maritime. I'm Joanne Rideout. It's Monday, June 3rd, 2024.

Well, today I'd like to follow up on something I talked about last week on the show: the death of a whale that washed up on the beach in the Halem, Oregon. One thing missing from that report was the cause of death, and we had to wait for the results of the necropsy on the whale's body. Now, that information has been released.

The Oregon Shores Conservation Coalition, posted this information from NOAA, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, on their Facebook page on May 31st. Many thanks to listener John for bringing it to my attention. Quote A necropsy of the young male humpback whale that stranded in Oregon found significant hemorrhaging, suggesting that it was struck by a vessel. The carcass drifted to shore a few miles south of Manzanita last week.

A small team first examined and took samples from the carcass on Monday. A larger team returned Thursday for a full necropsy that found bleeding, bruising and swelling along the whale's right side. The injuries suggest a blunt force impact, such as a vessel strike. Portland State University led the necropsy with help from Oregon State Parks, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Cascadia Research Collective and the Seaside Aquarium. Oregon State Parks is urging the public not to visit the remains of the whale, which are no longer intact. To avoid further disturbing threatened western snowy plovers, that nest nearby, anyone entering the area must respect restrictions in place and stay only on wet, hard packed sand. Dogs and bicycles are prohibited.

And that's from the press release about that, the whale's death. So a very sad end for that whale and a story that causes grief for those of us who love these amazing mammals.

I thought this would be a good opportunity to talk about this cause of death for whales and how common it is and what can be done to avoid it. Apparently, it happens fairly often.

According to a group called the Center for Ecosystem Sentinels, quote, along the U.S. West Coast, scientists estimate that out of all the large whales in this region, which include blue humpback and fin whales, over 80 are killed by vessel collisions each year. Scientists estimate that only 5 to 17% of whale carcasses are detected and recorded, so the actual number is likely much higher, close quote. And whales tend to sink after death because they're just so heavy. So if they're not near the coastline, we might never see them.

A bit about this organization, the Center for Ecosystem Sentinels, which is a local organization, and about the significance of their name. Here's something from their web site:

The Center for Ecosystem Sentinels, housed at the University of Washington, uses information from the study of sentinel species to educate scientists, the public and policymakers. Just as canaries alerted coal miners to dangerous air quality ecosystem, sentinels serve as early warning systems of natural or human caused environmental change. So whales are considered a sentinel species.

The reason for whale strikes is that large vessels and whales tend to frequent the same areas. Whales and ships, for instance, travel along the coast. Ships have defined shipping lanes that they follow. Here's some information from NOAA from 2023 efforts to move ships out of areas that are known to be frequented by whales.

This is from their website: the International Maritime Organization, the IMO, the United Nations agency that governs safety and environmental standards for shipping worldwide has adopted a U.S. proposal to increase protections for endangered Blue fin and humpback whales off the California coast.

The proposal took effect last summer and expanded areas that vessels should avoid to give whales more space and extended vessel traffic lanes west of in and around NOAA's Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary that's located north of Los Angeles, off Point Conception and Santa Barbara.

The Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council's Marine Shipping Working Group originally recommended the modifications in 2015. NOAA partnered with the U.S. Coast Guard to submit the proposal to the IMO in 2022. So you see, it's taken some time for even these changes to be enacted.

A 13 nautical mile extension of vessel traffic lanes known as the Traffic Separation Scheme will result in vessels lining up for port entry further west and away from the continental shelf in deeper waters where there are lower concentrations of whales. The area to be avoided by vessels is expanding by more than 2000 square nautical miles and covers in total approximately 4476 square nautical miles of important whale feeding habitat. Off point conception in Santa Barbara County, California. So that's a small area of the coast where changes have been made to make it a little safer for whales. But whales are swimming all along the West Coast.

It can be hard for ships to see whales. Ships hulls can extend far below the water's surface, 30 to 50 feet in some cases. So a whale in the water could simply be invisible to a passing ship. NOAA offers suggestions to vessel operators to avoid whales, such as learning when the seasonal abundance of large whales are in shipping lanes and being aware of whale advisories. Keeping a sharp lookout for whales, posting extra crew on the bow who are dedicated to watch for whales reduce speed within advisory zones or in areas of high, seasonal or local whale abundance. And if practical, reroute the vessel to avoid areas of high whale abundance. Now, these are all voluntary actions. Ship operators can choose whether to implement them or not.

So that is all I know about this situation. And while some measures have been taken to protect whales, there are vast areas of the coast and of the oceans of the world where ships and whales are sharing the same space. Sometimes as we've seen here, with tragic results.

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