

Occurrence of injuries on humpback, blue, and gray whales along the US West Coast and in SPLASH

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Along the US West Coast, long-term studies of three species, blue, humpback, and seasonal resident gray whales have provided information the fate of seriously injured animals. Blue and humpback whales have been individually identified annually since 1986, and the catalog for each species numbers just under 2,000 individuals. For both species the majority of feeding aggregation using this region has been identified. For gray whales, photographic identification from northern California to British Columbia has tracked a group about 250 regularly returning seasonal residents as well as stragglers from the larger overall gray whale population. In each of these populations, seriously injured animals have been documented. Although the exact cause of these injuries are not always clear, some appear to be ship strikes, propeller scars, and entanglement. While it is difficult to measure survival rate in these injured animals, it is clear that many with fairly serious injuries are surviving and being seen multiple years. While some individuals have been directly observed entangled, in most cases identification photographs allowing long-term tracking of survival of these individuals have not been available.

One special case occurring this year was a mother and calf, both seriously injured from a possible collision, swimming far up the Sacramento River to the Port of Sacramento and becoming the focus of a major rescue effort. While the ultimate fate of these two animals after they left San Francisco Bay is not known, it did provide an opportunity to closely examine short-term changes in their injuries and their reaction to a prolonged period in fresh water.

SPLASH represents an extensive collaborative effort (more than 50 research groups) to examine the abundance, trends, and structure of the entire North Pacific population of humpback whales including occurrence of injuries. The strength of this dataset is comparison of different locations since it represents a large collection representing all known feeding and wintering areas for humpback whales in the North Pacific with data collected in a consistent manner. Entanglement rates have been computed and will be summarized separately. Both entanglement and other types of injuries including killer whale rake marks, and serious injuries varied by geographic region and identified specific regions where certain types of injuries are more likely to occur.