UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF
COMMERCE
NEWS
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20230

NATIONAL
OCEANIC AND
ATMOSPHERIC
ADMINISTRATION

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NOAA03-114
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Sept. 26, 2003

SCIENTISTS DISCOVER POSSIBLE NEW WHALE SUBSPECIES

Whale Stranding Illustrates the Importance of Collecting Data from Stranded Marine Mammals

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) and scientists from various academic institutions believe they have found a new subspecies of Bryde's whale in North Carolina. NOAA is an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce.

On March 13, 2003, a beach comber found a dead baleen whale on the shore of Carolina Beach near Wilmington, North Carolina. During studies of tissue samples collected, scientists determined that the animal most likely died from starvation, as a result of line entanglement. Scientists also determined that the whale is a member of the baleen whale family, and has a unique genetic sequence, only seen in one other whale.

"Whales are such incredible animals, and we need to continue to learn as much as we can about them. As stewards of the environment, it is our responsibility to ensure their survival," said Dr. Janet Whaley, a veterinarian with NOAA Fisheries' Office of Protected Resources and coordinator of the National Marine Mammal Stranding Network. "When we look at marine mammals and determine their overall health and some of the things that might effect that, we can get clues about what might effect humans as well."

Similar to crime scene investigators, marine mammal scientists collect biological and other data from stranded animals, in order to piece together not only the identity and natural history of the species, but also to identify the cause of death. Such stranding investigations ultimately give scientists a glimpse into the type of threats facing marine species and the overall health of the oceans.

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A new federal program, funded by Congress and implemented by NOAA, the *John H. Prescott Marine Mammal Rescue Assistance Grant Program*, makes this kind of work possible, by providing funds to authorized volunteers and local communities during and after strandings.

Bryde's whale is a baleen whale and is unique in having three longitudinal ridges on its head. It has a prominent dorsal fin, which is relatively tall. Bryde's whales are typically tropical and subtropical species, but may be found in some slightly colder waters. They feed on pelagic schooling fish, such as anchovy and herring. Bryde's whales are active feeders, and can dive for 20 minutes or so. The Bryde's whale has twin blowholes with a low splash guard to the front. It has no teeth, but in their place are two rows of baleen plates.

NOAA Fisheries is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources, and the habitat on which they depend, through scientific research, management and enforcement. Our stewardship of these resources benefits the nation by supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, while helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public.

NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of America's coastal and marine resources.

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On the Internet:
NOAA - http://www.noaa.gov
NOAA's Fisheries - http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov
NOAA's Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program and the Prescott Grant Program -
http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/prot_res/PR2/Health_and_Stranding_Response_Program/mmhsrp.html

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Fact Sheet Attached

Fact Sheet
New Whale Subspecies

- Volunteers from the marine mammal stranding network, William McLellan and Dr. Ann Pabst of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington and scientists from the Smithsonian Institute collected scientific samples from the carcass on the beach.

- In the laboratory, Dr. Dave Rotstein from North Carolina State University analyzed the whale tissue samples collected, and determined that the animal most likely died from starvation as a result of a debilitating line entanglement.

- William McLellan and Dr. Ann Pabst of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington performed a necropsy (animal autopsy) of the dead whale.

- Genetic testing conducted at the NOAA Southwest Fisheries Science Center in La Jolla, California by Dr. Rick LeDuc shows that the animal was a member of the baleen whale family known as rorquals (the whale family that includes the well-known humpback whale and the enormous blue whale), and had a genetic sequence identical to a Bryde's whale sampled in 1992 in South Carolina. However, both Carolina samples appear distinct from other Bryde's whale samples from the Caribbean and Pacific.

- A team of scientists from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington led the immediate response and necropsy of this whale with assistance from local authorities.

- Scientists from the Smithsonian Institution collected the whale's skeleton, and are collaborating with other institutions in the U.S. and abroad to compare the skeleton with historic specimens.

- This possible subspecies of Bryde's whale appears to be unique from the other Bryde's whales studied.