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Fisheries and Oceans
Canada

MARINE MAMMAL RESPONSE PROGRAM ANNUAL REPORT 2009-2010



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Overview

Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) is responsible for assisting marine mammals and sea turtles in distress. In collaboration with conservation groups and non-governmental organizations, the Department supports marine mammal incident response networks in all DFO Regions under the umbrella of the Marine Mammal Response Program (MMRP).

Each DFO Region has their own unique component of the program which reflects the diversity of Canada's three coasts. In addition to marine animal response services, information is also collected by the program to provide insight on the types and magnitude of threats faced by marine animals. This program facilitates the implementation of the Species at Risk Act (SARA) by meeting legal requirements for 19 listed populations of marine mammals and sea turtles.

Overall, the Marine Mammal Response Program works with partners to:

- Track and respond to marine mammal entanglements, strandings (dead & live), ship strikes, contaminated animals (oiled), and other threats;
- Quantify threats affecting marine mammal species, with a special focus on species assessed as at risk;
- Provide data and information to support Species at Risk recovery planning initiatives, mitigation options, and policy development; and,
- Coordinate with Conservation and Protection on enforcement cases.

Summary of Activities

The 2009-2010 fiscal year was again successful in the implementation of the Marine Mammal Response Program. Overall, in 2009-2010, the Marine Mammal Response Program focused on outreach, training, improved reporting, network communication, and increased responses. Several media stories arose from response efforts, highlighting publicly the positive efforts of the program. The increased number of reports received in the 2009-2010 fiscal also showcases the increased efficiency of the Program and reinforces the fact that training and refreshers are required in order to effectively respond to as many cases as possible. This year training and information sessions related to response techniques were provided on both Pacific and Atlantic coasts for Conservation & Protection Officers and Marine Mammal observers; this training will continue in the next fiscal.

Outreach efforts provided a coast-to-coast distribution of SARA information documents and marine animal identification booklets; including toll-free number stickers distributed to fishermen to place onboard their vessels. In Newfoundland and Labrador, Leatherback Sea Turtle school presentations were also carried for children from kindergarten age to grade 12.

Necropsies are also an important component of the Marine Mammal Response Program by providing insight on known and potential threats to marine mammals and sea turtles.

Response Information

A total of 1144 reports were received, which is an increase to last fiscal year's 966 reports. In 2008-2009 the responses to reported incidents was 40% and increased to 54%, in 2009-2010 (see table 1). This demonstrates that the capacity to respond to incidents has improved as the program has developed. Species responded to included: Blue Whale, Humpback Whale, Fin Whale, Sei Whale, Pacific Grey Whale, Killer Whale, North Atlantic Right Whale, Beluga Whale, White-sided and White-beaked Dolphins, Harbour and Dall's Porpoises, Steller Sea Lions, Leatherback Turtles, Basking Sharks and more.

Not all reports can be investigated in the field, but an effort is made to follow-up with as many reports as possible. In 2009-2010, 54% (n = 1144) of reported cases were investigated through comprehensive interviews with incident reporters or with direct on-scene responses. The type of response is determined by regional priorities related to SARA listing status, accessibility, risk to responders, and likelihood of success. In some cases an on-scene response is not possible because the window of opportunity to respond is limited (disturbance or depredation) or the animal/carcass can not be re-sighted.

Identification of the species is often a challenge therefore awareness and education are key factors in the success of the Marine Mammal Response Program. At times, although a report is logged, the animal/carcass can not be re-sighted and therefore an expert can not identify it. At other times, the animal is in such a bad state it is hard to visually recognize.

SARA Specific Responses

The national percentage of responses to Species at Risk totaled to 38% (see table 1). In the Pacific region, 83% of the responses to cetaceans were Species at Risk and 100% of the responses to mustelids were also Species at Risk. As for the Québec region, 72% of the responses to cetaceans were for Species at Risk. In the Gulf region, 53% of the total responses were for species assessed as at risk. In the Maritimes region, 30% of the responses to cetaceans and turtles were for species at risk. In Newfoundland and Labrador region 70% of the responses were for SARA listed species.

Table 1 – Summary of reports received and responses to marine mammals in each region for the 2009-2010 fiscal year.

Region	No. Reported	No. Responded	% Responded	% SAR responses
Pacific	497	225	45	26
Central & Arctic	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Québec	342	199	58	50
Gulf	15	15	100	53
Maritimes	225	120	53	13
Newfoundland & Labrador	69	57	83	70
National Totals	1144	612	54	35

In Pacific Region, almost half (48%, n=64) of the overall Human Interaction reports involved some form of entanglement (from aquaculture, fisheries or unknown debris). In the Québec region, 76% (n=72) of the reports for cetaceans were for cases of dead animals, whereas 16% were for accidental bycatch. Additionally, seventy percent (n=73) of the reports for seals were for cases of dead animals. In Gulf Region, 10 (67%) of the reported incidents were for beached animals. In the Maritimes region, of the 20 (42%) cetacean incidents that resulted in survival, 30% were due to entanglements or entrapments. In the Newfoundland & Labrador region, at least 52% of the responses to Species at Risk (n=40), involved entanglements in fishing gear, including groundfish gillnets, whelk gear and capelin seine and trap gear.

Although the cause of death or type of gear is not always identified, entanglements appear to be the most common reason for a response across Canada. Being able to quantify this threat is important for assessing the impact of fishing gear entanglements on marine mammals in Canada. The continued delivery of the Marine Mammal Response Program directly impacts the recovery of listed marine mammal species by contributing critical knowledge on threats to aid in the development of mitigation measures.

Funding

The budget for the Marine Mammal Response program comes from three main sources: SARA (39%), Other DFO sectors (25%) and External organizations (36%), as shown in table 2. External organizations are both governmental and non-governmental such as the Marine Animal Response Society, the New-Brunswick Museum, the Atlantic Veterinary College, the Vancouver Aquarium, the Cetus Conservation Research Society and Parks Canada.

In the DFO Regions, funding is used for: call centres, marine mammal disentanglement kits, rescue pontoons and response training, seal relocation devices, necropsies, community outreach, and the maintenance of data.

Table 2 – Summary of funding and estimated in-kind contributions for the implementation of the Marine Mammal Response Program in the 2009-2010 fiscal year.

Total Cost of MMRP (\$)	SARA Funding (\$)	% SARA Toward Overall Cost	Other DFO Contribution (\$)	% Other DFO Toward Overall Cost	*External Contribution (\$)	% External Toward Overall Cost	% DFO & External Toward Overall Cost
1,220,538	475,000	39	309,258	25	436,280	36	61

Plans/Priorities for 2011-2012

Although the Marine Mammal Response Program is supported by the Department across Canada, due to regional distinctiveness, priorities vary. As the program continues to improve and reports continue to increase, there will be a need for more trained first responders, partners and volunteers. Hence, throughout the 2011-2012 fiscal

year, some common priorities across regions are responder training and increased access to response tools and equipment. Important tools for effective responses include rescue pontoons and a greater dispersion of marine mammal disentanglements kits. The availability of these tools in each Region contributes to quick and effective responses.

Finalizing regional response guidelines and operational procedures for marine mammal incident reports; consultations with northern co-management partners and community volunteers as well as continuous support and work with local groups in their activities are just some of the Region-specific priorities that will be important in contributing to the effective and successful implementation of the National Marine Mammal Response Program in 2011-2012.