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Fisheries and Oceans
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MARINE MAMMAL RESPONSE PROGRAM ANNUAL REPORT 2011-2012



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Photo Credit: Gregory Smith (Cover)

Overview

There is a wide range of human activities that impact on marine mammals and Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) has the responsibility to aid marine mammals in distress, particularly when they are listed under the Species at Risk Act (SARA). 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 program which reflects the diversity of Canada's three coasts. In addition to marine mammal response services, information is also collected by the program to provide insight on the types and magnitude of threats faced by marine mammals. This program facilitates the implementation of SARA by meeting legal requirements for 20 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

As of the fourth year of the Marine Mammal Response Program, regional networks are well established and have become a lot more visible to the general public. Increased support from local communities is recognized as they find ways to contribute to this initiative, whether financially, through awareness or response support. Non-Governmental Organizations play an important role in the continued development of the Marine Mammal Response Program. They contribute through awareness and education, in-field response and by providing communication tools for quicker, more efficient responses.

On-shore live stranding training was provided to C&P Officers in 2011, increasing the Department's capacity to respond to marine mammal incidents. Training sessions are divided in two parts, one theoretical and one practical where participants work with pontoons used for strandings. C&P Officers are often first responders and therefore contribute to the Marine Mammal Response Program on a daily basis. The importance of C&P Officer training and involvement in this Program is demonstrated in Figure 1, where a C&P Officer is responding to a live beach stranding incident.



Figure 1: April 27, 2011, Gulf Region - Fishery officer floats and guides a Minke whale on an inflatable pontoon in an attempt to free it from Merigomish Harbour.

International Meetings

International meeting attendance where the topics of disentanglement and / or bycatch mitigation measures are discussed is beneficial to the development of the Marine Mammal Response Program. The ability to learn from lessons and techniques used abroad gives our coordinators and partners a broad understanding of the issue and tools to address them; resulting in opportunities for improvement of the MMRP. The Maritimes and Gulf Regions staff attended the Right Whale Consortium Meeting in the United States of America in November 2011.

Response Information

In 2011-2012, a total of 913 incident reports were received. The response rate to incidents increased from 54% to 76% between 2009-2010 and 2010-2011, while this fiscal year experienced a response rate of 76% (n=696). This maintained response level could be interpreted as growing awareness of the Program and a stable capacity to respond. 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, and Basking Sharks, among others.

Not all incident reports are investigated in the field, but an effort is made to follow-up with as many incidents that are reported as possible. In 2011-2012, 76% of reported incidents were investigated through comprehensive interviews with incident reporters or with direct on-scene responses. For responses involving species at risk efforts are made to gather biometric data and, if the animal is deceased, conduct a necropsy. This data provides the Department with valuable information on causes of death, dietary information, genetics etc. This fiscal year, 57 necropsies and other sampling efforts for Species at Risk were recorded nationally. The type of response is

determined by SARA status, regional priorities, 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. Education therefore, is a key factor in the success of the Marine Mammal Response Program. At times, although an incident report is logged, the animal/carcass can not be re-sighted and therefore, an expert cannot confirm the species identify. At other times, the animal is in such a bad state (decomposed), that it is difficult to visually recognize.

SARA Specific Responses

SARA species represented 27% of the total national number of incidents (see Table 1). In the Pacific Region, of the 68 cetacean and sea turtle responses, 88% of those involved were species at risk. In the Québec Region, of the total 57 responses to cetaceans (no sea turtles reported), 79% were for species at risk. In the Gulf Region, 33% of cetacean and sea turtle responses were species at risk. In the Maritimes Region, 57% of all responses were for species at risk, which solely involved cetacean species. Similarly, in Central & Arctic, 56% of all MMRP responses involved species at risk, which were all cetacean species. Finally, in the Newfoundland and Labrador Region, 50% of cetacean and sea turtle responses were for species at risk.

Table 1 – Summary of species at risk reports and responses in each region for the 2011-2012 fiscal year.

| Region | # of SAR Incidents | # of SAR Responses |
|--------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Nfld & Labrador | 33 | 12 |
| Maritimes | 19 | 14 |
| Gulf | 8 | 8 |
| Québec | 73 | 45 |
| Central and Arctic | 5 | 5 |
| Pacific | 103 | 102 |
| Total: | 244 | 186 |

Threats

Although important efforts to provide assistance and response to marine mammals are seen within this program, entanglements and entrapments remain a major threat for the majority of cetaceans whether species at risk or not. The Marine Mammal Response Program is one of the few on the water activities taken by the Department to mitigate threats to marine mammals – of which the majority are listed under SARA.

Unlike in previous years of the MMRP, vessel strikes comprised a greater amount of all incidents recorded in the Pacific Region at 20% (n=97) and 48% for species at risk (n=49). Entanglements, previously seen in 2010-2011 as the more frequent incident, made up 17% (n=79) of all incidents and 20% (n=21) of species at risk. Although the percentage of entanglement incidents dropped, it comprised 88% of all Humpback Whale incidents in this Region; maintaining its status as the most frequently entangled cetacean seen in this program. In Newfoundland and Labrador, entanglements made up the largest percentage of occurring incident types at 33% (n=18) and 36% (n=12) for species at risk. In the Maritimes Region, entanglements comprised 7% (n=8) of all reported incidents and 28% of species at risk occurrences. The Gulf Region reported 18% (n=6) of all incidents as entanglements, and 100% of the species at risk incidents were forms of human interaction (HI) or disturbance. In the Quebec Region, the majority of incidents were for deceased marine mammals; 67% (n=146). The next most commonly reported incident, was human harassment, making up 9% (n=19) of all the reported incidents. Central and Arctic Region did not have many reported incidents, but entrapments and reports of sick

animals both occurred in 44% (n=4) of incidents, while entanglements were 11% (n=1) of reports. Nationally this fiscal, entanglements comprised 17% (n=40) of all reported species at risk incidents, while stranding events, a natural occurrence, was only seen in 2% (n=4) of the species at risk incidents.

Funding

The annual budget for the Marine Mammal Response Program is 1.4 million and comes from three main sources: SARA 34% (475K), other DFO sectors 16% (226K) and external organizations 50% (663K). External organizations are both governmental and non-governmental and are comprised of experts in the fields of veterinary and/or marine mammal science and research.

MMRP funding is used for: call centres; disentanglement kits; rescue pontoons; response training; relocation and monitoring devices; necropsies (materials, heavy equipment, storage, etc.); community outreach; equipment maintenance; data collection and reporting; and other expenses and supplies (i.e. gasoline for boats).

Plans/Priorities for 2012-2013

The Marine Mammal Response Program is supported by the Department across Canada and planning priorities can vary between Regions based on their unique needs.

Since only the key activities in each Region are discussed below, the day-to-day tasks and other activities may have been omitted in this report. Quebec Region will be investigating response training opportunities for partner groups. Gulf and Pacific Regions will focus on maintaining response capacity in their region through equipment availability & training. Similarly, Central and Arctic Region priorities will be given to collaborating with local communities in responding to marine mammal incidents, and providing them with kits of prepared documentation and sampling materials. As for Maritimes Region, stranding and turtle de-hooking training activities will be ongoing, as well as equipment maintenance and necropsy work. Finally, in Newfoundland & Labrador Region, basic level response training opportunities for C&P Officers will be investigated.