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Fisheries and Oceans
Canada

MARINE MAMMAL RESPONSE PROGRAM ANNUAL REPORT 2013-2014



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Photo Credit: Gregory Smith (Cover)

Overview

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). There is a wide range of human activities that impact marine mammals. In collaboration with conservation groups and non-government 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 its own network of responders which reflects the diversity of Canada's three coasts. In addition to marine mammal response services, information is also collected to provide insight on the types and magnitude of threats faced by marine mammals. The MMRP facilitates the implementation of the SARA by meeting legal requirements for all listed populations of marine mammals and sea turtles.

Overall, the Marine Mammal Response Program works with external 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 at risk;
- Provide data and information to support species at risk recovery planning initiatives, mitigation options, and policy development; and
- Support Conservation and Protection (C&P) investigations in enforcement cases.

Despite the important assistance the program provides for marine mammals, vessel strikes, entanglements, and entrapments remain a major threat for the majority of cetaceans, whether species at risk or not. The MMRP is the only on-the-water activity supported by the Department to respond to threats, track harm, and develop mitigation measures for marine mammals – of which the majority are listed under the SARA.

Summary of activities

The fiscal year 2013-14 marks seven years of a formally coordinated DFO Marine Mammal Response Program in each of the six departmental regions. Since the inception of the program, Departmental capacity to deal with marine animal emergency responses has grown. External partners continue to play an important role in marine animal emergency response and in most regions lead these activities. The efforts of all those involved – whether to educate, create awareness, carry-out an in-field response or develop communication tools – contribute to the success of emergency responses and conservation efforts. Highlighted below are the regional collaborations and developments that have stood out in the 2013-2014 fiscal year.

Newfoundland & Labrador Region

In 2013-2014, there were a total of 57 animals (sea turtles, cetaceans and pinnipeds), both species at risk and not-at-risk species, reported in this region. The main type of in-field response in this region is for entangled whales.

In the Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) region, the Marine Mammal Response Program is contracted to an external organization, the Whale Release and Stranding Group. The NL region has the largest feeding population of humpbacks in the northwest Atlantic, with about 5000 individuals visiting NL waters during spring, summer, and fall. A large tourism industry in the NL region depends on the presence of these whales.

Entanglements affect humpback whales as well as other species such as, minke whales, fin whales, sperm whales, and leatherback turtles. Other incidents of note include:

- A green sea turtle died on a beach in 2013;
- A beluga whale was sighted in 2014;
- Leatherback turtles and killer whale pods were sighted in 2013;
- A high number of sperm whales were found dead on the shores of Newfoundland and the French Islands in 2014; and
- In March 2014, nine northwest Atlantic blue whales became entrapped in ice and died. This species is listed as endangered under the Species at Risk Act, with an estimated population of 250 individuals.

Maritimes

In the Maritimes region, 51 animals (sea turtles, cetaceans, and pinnipeds), both species at risk and not-at-risk species, were reported to the Maritimes Animal Response Society (MARS). Beached whales remain the main type of cetacean response in this region.

The main species found stranded on beaches in this region include: Atlantic white-sided dolphins, harbour porpoises, long finned pilot whales, and leatherback and green sea turtles. There were also several unusual reports for stranded sunfish and a fin whale. There was assistance to re-float the fin whale from the Conservation and Protection (C&P) officers.

There was also a report of an entangled north Atlantic right whale and an effort was made to locate the animal but it could not be found after the initial sighting report.

Gulf Region

There were a total of 59 incidents logged in this region, involving 36 animals (sea turtles, cetaceans and pinnipeds), some of which were species at risk. The majority of species were long-finned pilot whales and porpoises that were beached.

In May 2013, a humpback whale was entangled in snow crab gear and the Campobello Whale Rescue Team, assisted by DFO fisheries officers, successfully removed one of the three traps. The team returned next morning but was unable to relocate the whale. In June 2013, a sowerby's beaked whale was found beached in the PEI National Park and a necropsy was done on-site by the Canadian Cooperative Wildlife Health Centre (CCWHC). The whale was then transported to the NB Museum in Saint John. In September 2013, north Atlantic right whales were sighted by whale watching tours off Maryville Wharf, NS. Given the significantly low number of north Atlantic right whales in the Bay of Fundy in 2013, researchers are interested to see if the species also uses, or has begun to use, the waters of the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

Quebec Region

In 2013-2014, the Quebec Region received 458 calls and treated 193 cases that required an in-field response. Incidents reported included: entanglements (1 fin whale and 3 minke whales, in which all 3 minke whales were found dead); live strandings (4, 1 including a pilot whale); and, rare species sightings (2, including a sowerby's beaked whale that washed up dead on a beach and a blue and white female dolphin that was stranded live then died).

The fin whale entanglement in a snow crab trap generated significant media attention and required the cooperation and work of several partners. For 6 days the rescue team of people from Parks Canada and the GREMM and supported by the Campobello Whale Rescue Team adopted several strategies to free the whale. The animal has not been seen since June 13th 2013 and no reports have been made despite air and sea patrols. The chances of finding the whale alive are very unlikely due to the severity of this entanglement.

Beluga mortalities of the St. Lawrence Estuary, an endangered species listed under the SARA, remained high in 2013. Seventeen carcasses were reported including 5 calves, 2 juveniles, and 10 adults. There were also over 33 deaths of harbour porpoises reported in 2013.

Central and Arctic

In the Central and Arctic Region, 5 incidents were reported involving a narwhal, killer whales, and a long-finned pilot whale. In the Region, DFO Conservation and Protection (C&P) works closely with local government and hunter and trapper organizations to deal with incident responses.

The incident of the beached long-finned pilot whale, representatives from the Government of Nunavut and the local hunter and trapper organization collected biological samples and forwarded them to DFO Science in the region for analysis.

Increases in the presence of killer whales (from the Northwest Atlantic/Eastern Arctic population) and vessel traffic around Baffin Island have resulted in an increase in reports to DFO about the possible disturbance of these whales by whale watching vessels.

Pacific Region

The British Columbia Marine Mammal Response Program (BCMMRN) received a total of 370 reports of marine mammal incidences. A total of 54 marine mammals (44 species at risk, 10 non-species at risk) were necropsied or sampled including: 21 harbour porpoises, 8 stellar sea lions, 6 sea otters, 5 California sea lions, 3 killer whales, 3 humpback whales, 1 blue whale, 1 grey whale, 1 fin whale, 1 green turtle, 1 northern right whale, 1 Pacific white-sided dolphin, 1 elephant seal, and 1 cuvier's beaked whale.

The Region had a record number of marine mammal vessel harassment/human interactions reported (64). These reports were forwarded to C&P for further review. There were also a high number of live stranded and dead harbour porpoises (27), both adults and calves. Marine debris and fishing gear continues to be an entanglement

concern with 33 incidents (16 sea Lions, 11 humpback whales, 4 harbour seals, 1 harbour porpoise, and 1 grey whale) of entangled marine mammals reported. A DFO entanglement team successfully disentangled 5 humpback whales and 1 grey whale.

In the summer of 2013 a juvenile transient killer whale became estranged from its pod in an isolated bay. The decision was made to try and move the animal out of the bay to increase its chances of a reunion with its pod. The DFO and Vancouver Aquarium team was successful and the animal was observed swimming with its pod several weeks later.

National Training for Conservation and Protection Officers

Several fishery officer-large whale satellite tag attachment training sessions were conducted in the Pacific, Gulf, and Maritimes Regions this year to improve the ability of DFO officers to assist in large whale disentanglements. These sessions proved very useful and included classroom training and on-water training regarding safety aspects when approaching entangled large whales and attaching satellite tags/buoys.

National Meeting of Canada's Marine Animal Emergency Response

In March 2014, the DFO Marine Mammal Working Group (MMWG) and representatives from other DFO sectors and external partner organizations met to discuss plans and priorities for the 2014-15 fiscal year. This annual meeting provides an opportunity for participants to discuss key issues to assure the implementation of the Marine Mammal Response Program (MMRP).

This year, the MMWG in collaboration with representatives from the species at risk program, Conservation and Protection, and external partners identified network priorities and funding allocations for the 2014-15 fiscal year. In addition, the representative from the Canadian Wildlife Federation provided an update on the formation of the National Marine Animal Emergency Response Steering Committee, the formation of which was discussed at the 2013 annual MMWG meeting. The development of the national steering committee came from an agreed upon need identified by regional response networks. They felt that they would benefit from the coordination of overarching national issues, particularly those that would serve to unite and reinforce the response networks, and lead to the sharing of expertise and resource.

A National Summary of Response Information

In 2013-2014, a total of 594 incident reports were received, involving 703 animals, both species at risk and not-at-risk species. Of the 594 incidents reported, some were reports of animal sightings, which provide valuable information but do not require a field response. Information provided from Quebec Region does not include reports or responses to pinnipeds.

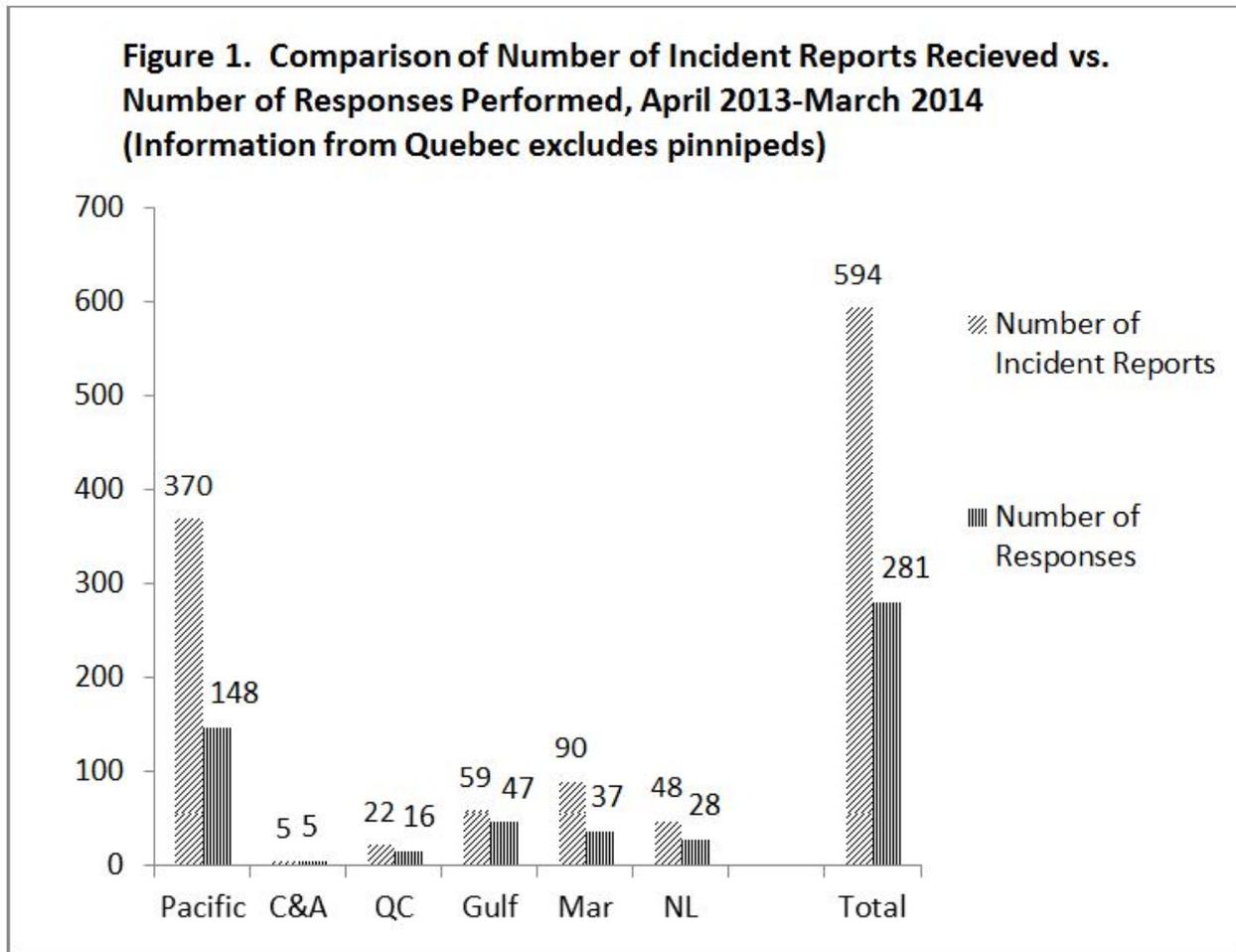


Figure 1. Comparison of Number of Incident Reports Received vs. Number of Responses Performed, April 2013-March 2014 (Information from Quebec excludes pinnipeds)

	Pacific	C&A	QC	Gulf	MAR	NL	Total
Number of Incident reports	370	5	22	59	90	48	594
Number of Responses	148	5	16	47	37	28	281

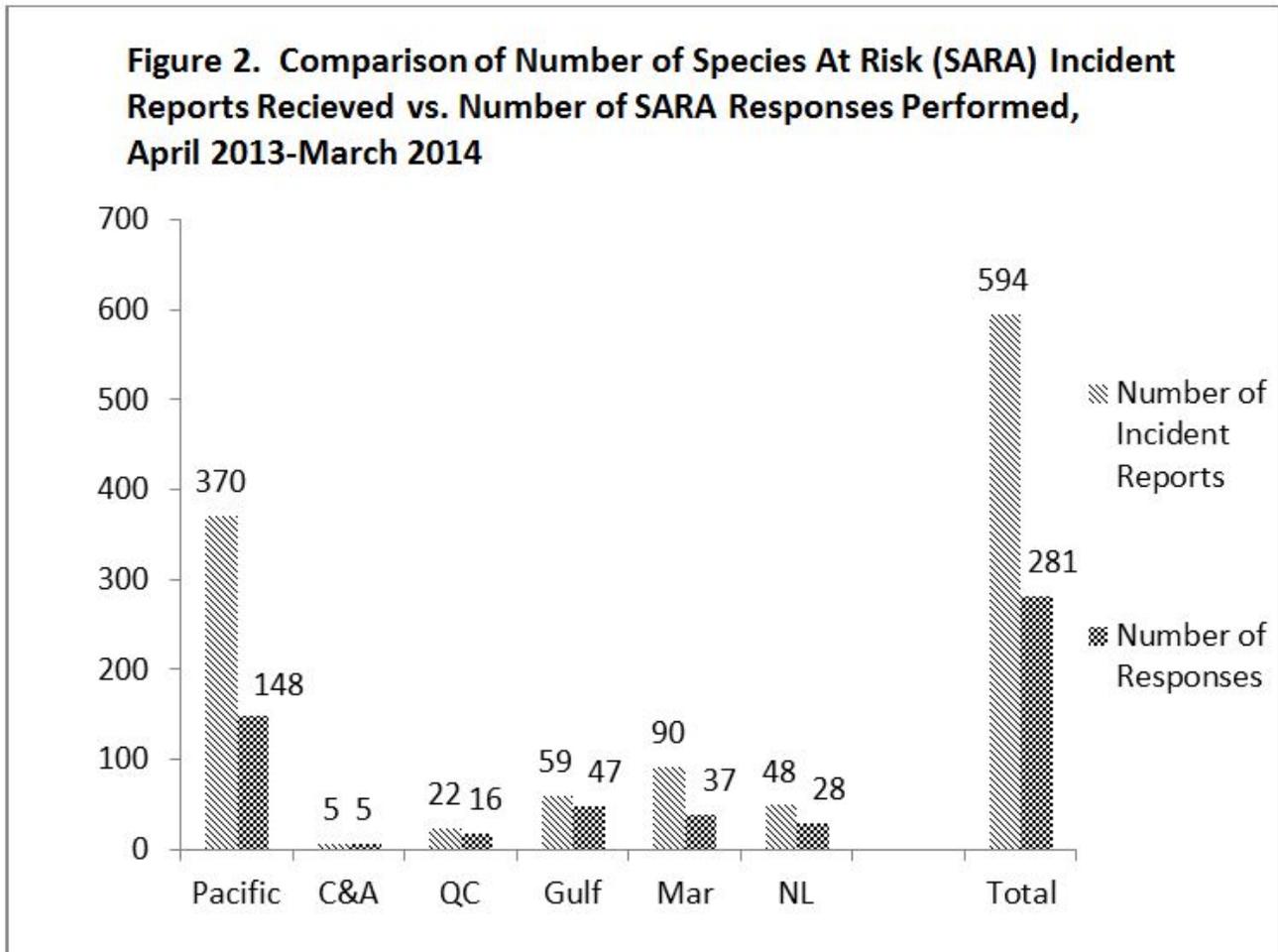
Although not all incident reports are investigated in the field, efforts are made to follow up with as many incidents that are reported as possible. In some cases an on-scene response is not possible because the window of opportunity to respond is limited due to disturbances or depredation, or the animal/carcass cannot be re-sighted. Although all incident reports are logged, the animal/carcass can often not be re-sighted, and therefore an expert cannot confirm the species identity.

For responses involving species at risk or rarely encountered species, efforts are made to gather biometric data and, if possible, conduct a necropsy. Biometric and necropsy information provides the Department with valuable data on species size, age class, cause of death, dietary information, genetics, etc. This fiscal year, 48 necropsies and 43 other sampling efforts were conducted nationally.

Species at Risk Specific Reponses

In field responses for species at risk represented 54% of the 280 total number of responses, excluding sightings. Figure 2 compares the number of incidents reported for species at risk to the number of in-field responses for the same.

Figure 2. Comparison of Number of Species At Risk (SARA) Incident Reports Recieved vs. Number of SARA Responses Performed, April 2013-March 2014



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Funding

Marine animal responses require a significant financial commitment. Fisheries and Oceans Canada currently provides \$300,000 annually to support these activities across the DFO regions. External partners, both provincial government and non-government, contribute additional funds and invaluable expertise in veterinary and/or marine mammal science and research.

Plans/Priorities for 2014-2015

The DFO Marine Mammal Response Program is present in all regions, and collaboration with external partners

is key to its success. The DFO National Marine Mammal Working Group is committed to working with external partners to identify priorities and plans for the 2014-2015 fiscal year, which may vary between regions based on their unique needs.