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Fisheries and Oceans
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MARINE MAMMAL RESPONSE PROGRAM ANNUAL REPORT 2012-2013



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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 on marine mammals. 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 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 SARA by meeting legal requirements for all listed populations of marine mammals and sea turtles.



High Arctic Ice Entrapment of Beluga Whales
Photo Credit M.A. Ramsay, University of Saskatchewan

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 as 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.

Although important efforts to provide assistance and response to marine mammals are seen within this program, vessel strikes, entanglements and entrapments remain a major threat for the majority of cetaceans whether Species at Risk or not. The MMRP is one of the few on the water activities supported by the Department to respond to threats, track harm, and develop mitigation measures for marine mammals – of which the majority are listed under SARA.

Summary of activities

As of the sixth year of the DFO Marine Mammal Response Program, regional relationships with response network partners are well established and are 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. External partner organizations play a key role in marine mammal emergency response and the continued development of the DFO Marine Mammal Response Program. They contribute in all aspects whether it is in awareness and education, in-field response or providing communication tools for quicker, more efficient responses. Regional collaborations and developments that have stood out in the 2012-2013 fiscal year are outlined below.

Newfoundland & Labrador Region

In 2012-2013, there were a total of 44 incidents reported, excluding sightings, in this Region. Entanglements made up 50% of occurring incident report types, excluding sightings out of any species combined.

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 5,000 individuals visiting NL waters during spring, summer and fall. These whales are the basis for a large tourism industry in the NL Region. The Region also has a large fishing industry.

Entanglements affected Humpback Whales, and well as other species such as; Minke Whales, White Beak Dolphins, and Basking Sharks. These entanglements can cause damage to the whales as pictured in Figure 1. Stranding incidents also occurred for a Minke and Sperm Whale in 2012.



Figure 1: After being disentangled from fishing gear, the whale can be seen swimming away with damage to its peduncle.

Photo credit: Wayne Ledwell - Whale Release and Stranding.

Maritimes Region

In the Maritimes Region, 104 incidents were reported, excluding sightings. Entanglements comprised 6.7% of these, while Species at Risk occurrences represent 2.9% or 3 individuals.

Response activities this past fiscal year included disentanglements, Right Whale carcass removal, Right Whale skeleton relocation, satellite tagging, and the herding of entrapped marine mammals using a seine. In addition, disentanglement training was provided to C&P Officers, increasing the Region's capacity to assist external partners and respond to marine animal incidents.

Gulf Region

Of the 37 incident reports, excluding sightings, in the Gulf Region, entanglements represent 8.7% for any species combined; while there were no entanglements reported for Species at Risk. Dead animals found on the beach accounted for 74.3% or 26 individuals out of all incident reports of any species combined excluding

sightings, and 16% were for Species at Risk.

For the 2012-2013 fiscal year, C&P Officers throughout the Gulf region were provided with necessary response tools to quickly and effectively address incidents involving marine animals. A total of 37 marine mammal incidents were reported. A point of interest was the discovery of a dead Loggerhead Sea Turtle, a rarely encountered species, found on a beach. Necropsy results did not reveal abnormalities. On October 13 and 14, three Minke Whales were found stranded and deceased.

Quebec Region

In the Quebec region, 562 calls were answered for a total of 232 cases; 170 of those cases required an in-field response, while the Call Centre's experts treated the others over the phone. Two thirds of those field responses were for carcasses found on the beach. Live incidents of cetaceans that required a field response included: live strandings (1 neonate beluga and 1 minke whale); entanglements (5 minke whales and 1 humpback whale); 1 disoriented beluga (found in water near old Montreal); and, sightings of right whales (vigilance programme). Sick, injured, orphaned or weak seals (harbour, grey harp, hooded and bearded) in crowded areas also required field responses (44 cases, mainly monitoring and public awareness).

A high number of mortalities of Common Dolphins were noticed again in 2012. Between the end of May and mid-July, 13 deaths of Common Dolphins occurred. During the fall of 2011, the region reported 9 deaths of Common Dolphins. Also, it was an active year for beluga incidents in the region. A record number of newborn beluga deaths were reported in 2012, a total of 17 calves.

In September 21, 2012, a carcass of Sperm Whale was discovered on the beach in Escuminac, Quebec. Sperm whales frequent the waters of the Gulf of St. Lawrence during warm water times of year but carcass sightings are rare.

Central and Arctic Region

Central and Arctic Region had 4 reported incidents excluding sightings, however, the number of animals involved in these incidents was approximately 58 individuals. Of the 3 incident reports for Bowhead Whales of Eastern Canada West Greenland population, 2 occurrences were for floating deceased animals, while the other was for an injured animal.

On January 8, 2013 in Inukjuak, Quebec a pod of a dozen of Killer Whales was found entrapped in ice. This situation is unusual because killer whales usually leave the Arctic before the ice moves in. A few days after the incident was reported the ice on the bay shifted and opened up giving the pod a safe passage to open water.

In February 2013, a pod of approximately 75 Beluga Whales was ice entrapped in Sanikiluaq, Nunavut. Polar bears and Inuit hunters harvested some of entrapped animals. Hunters and Trappers Organisations and DFO collaborated to collect scientific information from all the dead belugas and took samples (including some of those killed by polar bears).

Pacific Region

The British Columbia Marine Mammal Response Program (BCMMRN) had a total of 323 marine mammal incidences reported. This fiscal year there were 35 live stranded and dead Harbour Porpoises (adults and calves) between April and August, 2012, while stranding events, a natural occurrence account for 10.9% (35) of the incidents reported. A total of 63 marine mammals were necropsied or sampled including: 27 Harbour Porpoises, 11 Humpback Whales, 10 Steller Sea Lions, 8 Sea Otters, 2 Grey Whales, and 1 Sperm Whale. The BCMMRN continues to have a growing volunteer base which now totals over 250 network supporters.

The Pacific Region had a large number of marine mammal vessel harassment incidents reported; 46 incidents. Marine debris and fishing gear continues to be an entanglement concern which accounts for 9% or 29 incidences of the total reported (10 Humpbacks whales; 10 Steller Sea Lions; 5 Harbour porpoise/dolphins; and 4 Grey whales). On a positive note, the calf of a Humpback Whale mother and calf pair that was responded to in 2012 was sighted/photographed in good health in 2013. In 2012, the calf was found severely entangled in fishing gear and the DFO response team was able to remove the gear.

National Meeting of Canada's Marine Animal Emergency Response

The first meeting of Canadian organizations involved in marine animal response was held on March 25-26th in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island. It was organized by the Marine Animal Response Society of Nova Scotia and attended by approximately 30 participants including representatives from all stranding networks across Canada, except the Arctic. The non-DFO representatives (veterinarians, universities, aquaria, Non-Governmental Organisations and industry) primarily discussed ways to become more united and organized across the country so they can better respond to marine mammal incidents and share experience (training) and equipment resources. The financial and legislative support, but especially the support from DFO C&P Officers was acknowledged and appreciated. The discussions identified a number of ideas on ways that DFO can further support their work and the decision was made for the formation of a national steering committee.

A National Summary of Response Information

In 2012-2013, a total of 1,070 incident reports were received, involving over 1,464 animals, Species at Risk and not at risk species combined. Of the 1,070 incidents reported, some were reports of animal sightings which provide valuable information but do not require a field response. 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.

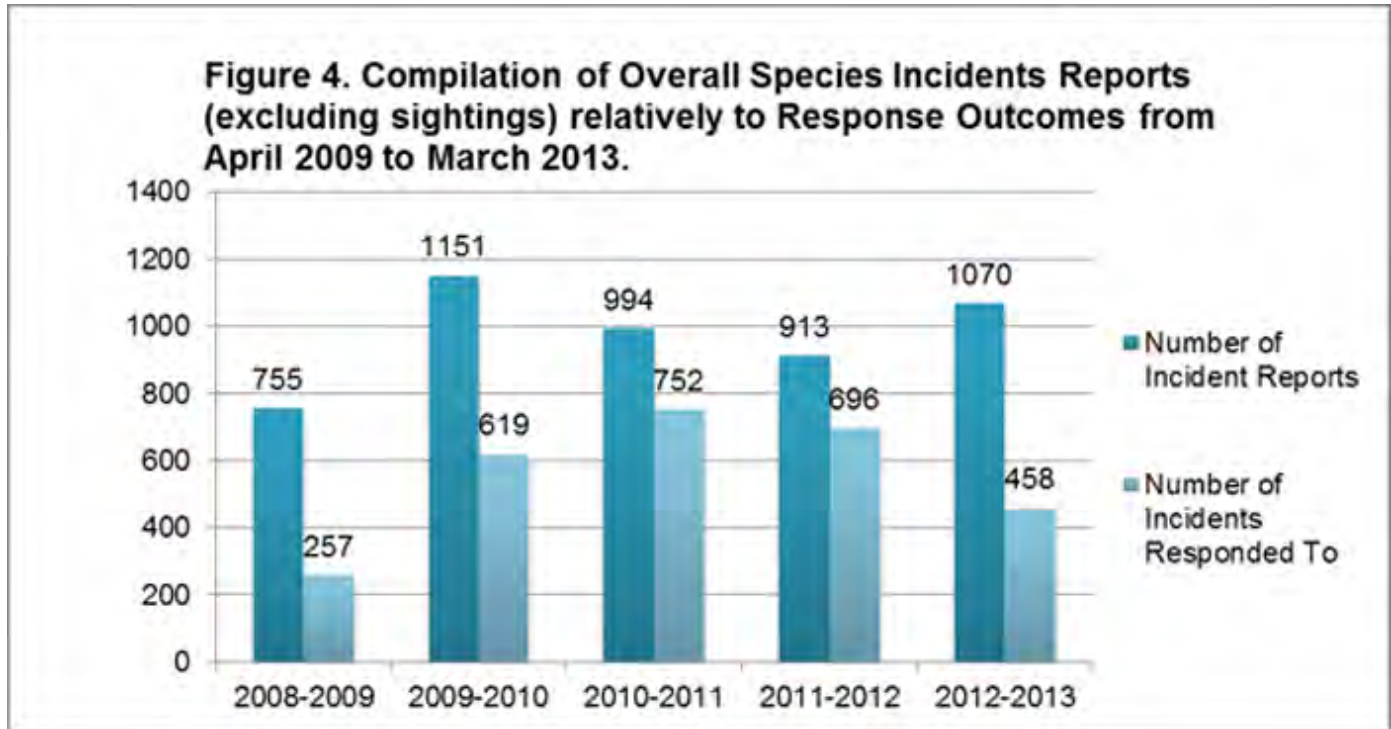


Figure 4. Compilation of Overall Species Incidents Reports (excluding sightings) relatively to Response Outcomes from April 2009 to March 2013.

	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013
Number of Incident Reports	755	1151	994	913	1070
Number of Incidents Responded To	257	619	752	696	458

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 2012-2013, 46.9% of all reported cases including sightings 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 possible, conduct a necropsy.

Necropsy information provides the Department with valuable data on causes of death, dietary information, genetics etc. This fiscal year, 96 necropsies or other sampling efforts for Species at Risk were recorded nationally. 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 can not be re-sighted. At other times, the animal is in such a bad state (decomposed), that it is difficult to visually recognize the species.

In all regions, incident reports are often not accurate in terms of species identification. Educating the public and providing them with tools to help with identification (a marine mammal ID application for example) would greatly improve the efficiency of the program. Although all incident reports are logged, the animal/carcass can

often not be re-sighted and therefore, an expert cannot confirm the species identify.

Species at Risk Specific Responses

Responses for species at risk represented 56% of the 458 national total number of responses, excluding the sightings. Figure 5 shows a comparison of the number of incidents reported for species at risk compared to the number of in-field responses for the same.

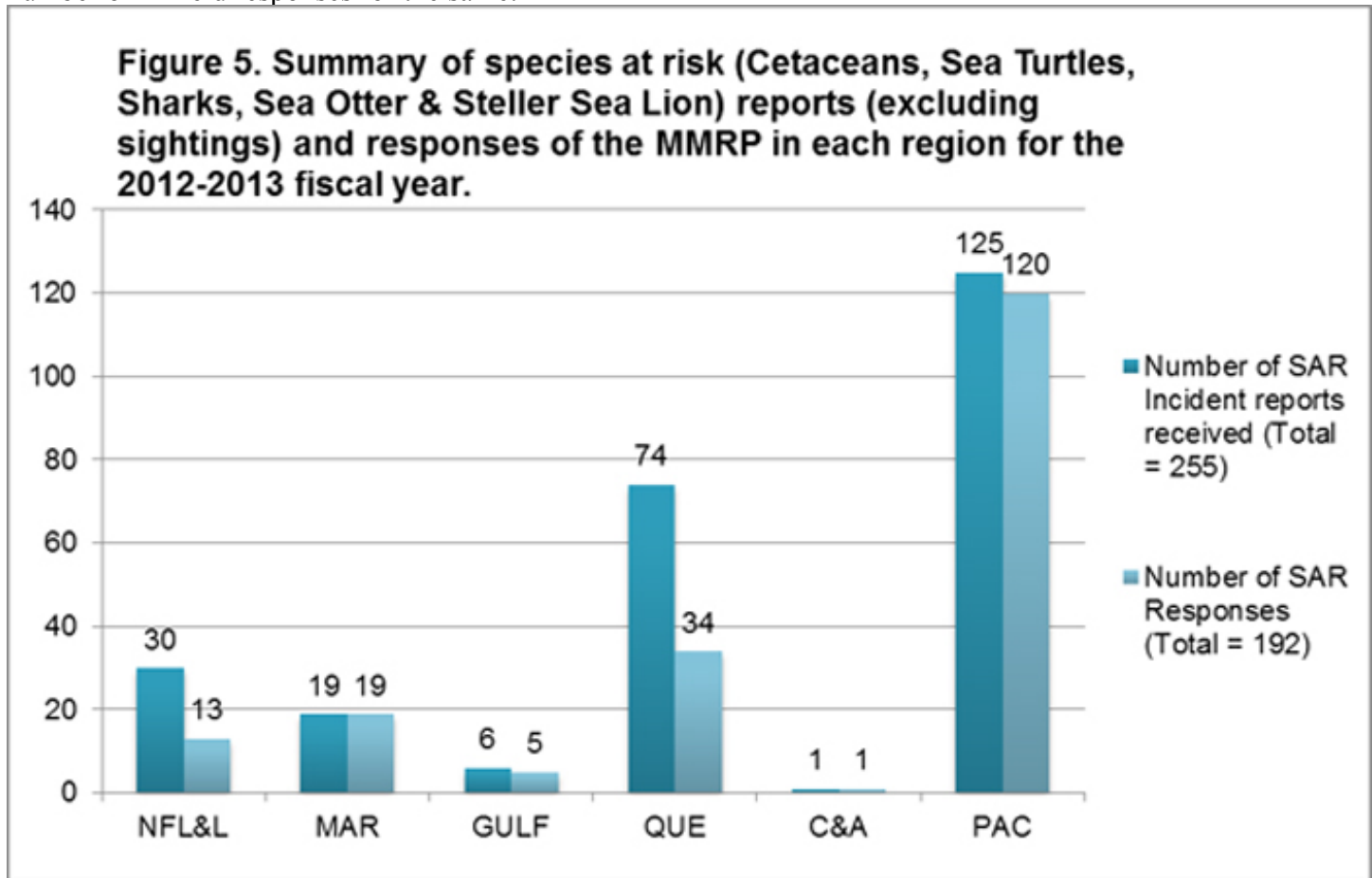


Figure 5. Summary of species at risk (Cetaceans, Sea Turtles, Sharks, Sea Otter & Steller Sea Lion) reports (excluding sightings) and responses of the MMRP in each region for the 2012-2013 fiscal year.

	NFL&L	MAR	GULF	QUE	C&A	PAC	Total
Number of SAR Incident reports received	30	19	6	74	1	125	255
Number of SAR Responses	13	19	5	34	1	120	192

Funding

Marine animal responses are a large financial commitment. Fisheries and Oceans Canada currently provides \$300,000 annually to support these activities in each region. 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 2013-2014

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 plan for the 2013-2014 fiscal year, which can vary between regions based on their unique needs.