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Marine Mammal Project : semi-annual report, 1 Jan-30 June 1990

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SEMI-ANNUAL REPORT
MARINE MAMMAL PROJECT

Submitted by

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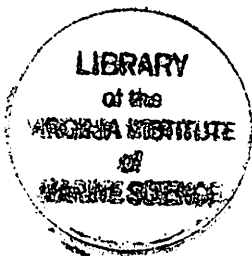
to

Commonwealth of Virginia
Council on the Environment

J. A. Musick, Principle Investigator

Prepared by
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July 31, 1990



Introduction

The Virginia Institute of Marine Science/School of Marine Science is the marine mammal stranding coordinator for the state of Virginia. Its purpose is to collect data from strandings, conduct population estimates from local marine mammal fauna, and to provide rehabilitation efforts to live stranded marine mammals.

Thirteen marine mammals, including twelve cetaceans and one pinniped, have been reported stranded in Virginia since 1 January 1990. The strandings were comprised of six different species. The most reported stranded species has been Tursiops truncatus (6). Two marine mammals, a harbor porpoise Phocoena phocoena and a humpback whale Megaptera novaeangliae, were stranded live. The harbor porpoise died during transport, while the humpback whale was euthanized. Most strandings occurred during May (6).

When possible dead animals are necropsied to identify causes of death. Also, stomach samples are taken to determine diet, and tissue samples (blubber, muscle, etc.) are taken for genetic assay and contaminant analysis.

Strandings

I. Cetacea

Balaenoptera

Megaptera. Since 1 January 1990, three humpback whales, Megaptera novaeangliae, were reported stranded on Virginia Beach shores. Strandings were reported on 1 April at Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge, 19 June 1990 at Seashore State Park, and 20 June at Sandbridge. Animal MM-20June-90 live stranded, but deemed terminal by our cooperating veterinarian and euthanized. Another calf entangled itself in a gill net on 1 April, but freed itself before rescuers arrived.

The three stranded animals were immature females of 1 to 1 1/2 years of age. Stomach contents and fecal material were found in all three animals, indicating the animals had been feeding shortly before their death. The 20 June animal had fresh remains of menhaden, Brevoortia tyrannus, in all three stomachs. Stomach contents of all three animals were sent to NMFS laboratory in Gloucester, Mass. for contaminant analysis.

The last two previous recorded strandings of this species in Virginia occurred on 20 December 1989 and 15 February 1986, but several sightings of humpback whales were reported during the 1989/1990 winter season off Virginia Beach and North Carolina. On 26 February, five humpbacks were seen 1/2 mile off Sandbridge. The pod reportedly consisted of two adults and three calves. One of the whales displayed breaching behavior. A single whale, estimated to be 15-20 m was seen swimming four miles off Virginia Beach on 11 March. A sub-adult was seen during an aerial survey, 400 m off Currituck beach, North Carolina on 8 June. Schools of menhaden were noted near the animal. On 21-23 June, a humpback was sighted several times swimming between Sandbridge and Damneck, Naval Air Station, Virginia Beach. The presence of these animals throughout the winter (Table 1) may indicate a group which did not make the full migration to the Antilles and overwintered in Virginia coastal waters.

Delphinidae

Tursiops. The bottlenose dolphin, Tursiops truncatus, is the most abundant marine mammal in Virginia's waters, and this is reflected in numbers of strandings and sightings. Between 1 January and 30 June, six bottlenose dolphins stranded along Virginia's shores (Table 2). The strandings occurred during May and June, coinciding with the normal movement of dolphins into the area, which is supported by live sightings (Table 2) and aerial surveys (below). Samples of tooth, blubber, muscle, liver, and stomach contents were taken when possible.

Four bottlenose dolphins have stranded on Virginia's Eastern Shore. These strandings were a unsexed animal ashore on Wallops Island on 10 May, an unsexed animal ashore on Hog Island on 14 May, a 200 cm female ashore on Parramore Island on 16 May, and a 227 cm male reported dead behind America's Inn in Northampton County on 8 June. On 10 May, a unsexed bottlenose dolphin stranded on the south end of Wallops Island on the Eastern Shore.

Two bottlenose dolphins stranded in Virginia Beach. On 9 May, a 171 cm male stranded in Sea Shore State Park. Blubber and liver samples were taken. On 22 May, a highly decomposed bottlenosed dolphin washed up in False Cape State Park. The animal was identified as a Tursiops on the basis of tooth and jaw morphology.

Stenella. Striped dolphins, Stenella coeruleoalba, are pelagic animals and usually strand on Virginia's ocean coastline. From 1 January to 30 June, one striped dolphin stranding was reported. A 215 cm female (MM-31May-90) stranded dead on 31 May 1990 at Ship Shoal, Northampton county.

Lagenorhynchus. White-sided dolphins, Lagenorhynchus acutus, are colder water animals, normally found well north of Virginia waters. A 226 cm female (J6M455), which stranded dead on 26 February 1990 on Assateague Island, Accomack county, was the second Virginia stranding reported in the last ten years. The animal was worked up by the Smithsonian Institution.

Phocoenidae

Phocoena. Harbor porpoises, Phocoena phocoena, usually inhabit Virginia waters during the months of February, March, and April. A 115 cm male live stranded on 30 January at Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge, Virginia Beach (Table 3). The animal died upon arrival of VIMS stranding cooperators. The porpoise was transported to VIMS for necropsy where samples of teeth, liver, blubber, and muscle were taken. Stomach contents included 1 large squid beak, a normal food item of harbor porpoises. Probable cause of death was hemorrhaging in the intestinal tract.

II. Pinnipedia

Phocidae

Virginia has no natural population of seals, however, harbor seals, Phoca vitulina, have been sighted in the past. These animals may stray into Virginia waters during the winter and spring months. On 20 January, a 1.5 m seal was seen basking "for a long time" before swimming off in the Great Wicomico River, near Burgess, Virginia. This animal may be a Phoca, however a positive identification was not made.

Halichoerus. A 164 cm gray seal, (Halichoerus grypus), stranded on 18 March on Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge, Assateague Island. Grey seals are

indigenous to more northern waters, and presence of the animals in Virginia may represent strays, although gray seals have recently been expanding their range southward.

Table 1

Species, Date, Status, Length, Sex, and Location for Balaenoptera Stranded and Sighted in Va. and Adjacent Waters, Ja.-Jun. 1990

<u>Species</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Status*</u>	<u>Length(cm)</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Location</u>
<u>Megaptera novaeangliae</u>	26 Feb	S	?	?	Pod of five whales seen 1/2 mile off Sandbridge, Va. Beach
<u>Megaptera novaeangliae</u>	11 Mar	S	1800 (est)	?	Lone whale seen 4 miles off Va. Beach
<u>Megaptera novaeangliae</u>	1 Apr	D.S.	960	F	Back Bay Wildlife Refuge, Va. Beach
<u>Megaptera novaeangliae</u>	3 Apr	I.C.	1000 (est)	?	Entangled in gill net off Rudies Inlet, Lynnhaven, Va. Beach
<u>Megaptera novaeangliae</u>	8 Jun	S	?	?	See 400 m off Curretuk, N.C. during aerial survey
<u>Megaptera novaeangliae</u>	19 Jun	D.S.	829	F	Sea Shore State Park, Va Beach
<u>Megaptera novaeangliae</u>	20 Jun	L.S.	820	F	Sandbridge, Va. Beach
<u>Megaptera novaeangliae</u>	21 Jun	S	?	?	Whale seen off Sandbridge, Va. Beach in shallow water
<u>Megaptera novaeangliae</u>	23 Jun	S	?	?	Whale seen off Damneck, Naval Air Station, Va. Beach

*D.S.=Dead Stranding L.S.=Live Stranding S=Sighting I.C.=Incidental Catch

Table 2
 Species, Date, Status, Length, Sex and Location Data for Delphinidae
 Stranded in Va., Jan.-Jun. 1990.

<u>Species</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Status*</u>	<u>Length(cm)</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Location</u>
<u>Tursiops truncatus</u>	9 May	D.S.	171	M	Sea Shore State Park, VA Beach
<u>Tursiops truncatus</u>	10 May	D.S.	?	?	South end of Wallops Island
<u>Tursiops truncatus</u>	14 May	D.S.	?	?	Hog Island, Eastern Shore
<u>Tursiops truncatus</u>	16 May	D.S.	200	F	Parramore Island Eastern Shore
<u>Tursiops truncatus</u>	22 May	D.S.	?	?	False Cape State Park, Va. Beach
<u>Tursiops truncatus</u>	8 Jun	D.S.	227	M	Behind America's Inn, Northampton County
<u>Stenella coeruleoalba</u>	31 May	D.S.	215	F	Ship Shoal, Northampton County
<u>Lagenorhynchus acutus</u>	26 Feb	D.S.	226	F	Assateague Island

*D.S.=Dead Stranding

Table 3
 Species, Date, Status, Length, Sex, and Location Data for Phocoenidae
 Stranded in Va., Jan.-Jun. 1990

<u>Species</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Status*</u>	<u>Length (cm)</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Location</u>
<u>Phocoena phocoena</u>	30 Jan	L.S.	115	M	Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge, Va Beach

*L.S.=Live Stranding

Table 4

Species, Date, Status, Length, Sex, and Location Data for Phocidae Stranded and Sighted in Va., Jan.-Jun. 1990

<u>Species</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Status*</u>	<u>Length(cm)</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Location</u>
<u>Phoca vitulina</u> ?	20 Jan.	S	150(est)	?	Great Wicomico River, Burgess Va.
<u>Halichoerus grypus</u>	18 Mar.	D.S.	164	?	Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge, Eastern Shore.

* S=Sighting D.S.=Dead Stranding