

Season-end Report



Rachel Finn and LTJG Sara Thompson hold some of the gear removed from a humpback whale off Maui.

Authorization:

Provided by NOAA Fisheries' Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program (permit #18786-03).

Objectives:

- Provide safe and authorized response to entangled large whales in order to free some large whales from life threatening entanglements.
- Increase awareness.
- Gather valuable information that may mitigate the threat (risks) of entanglement for large whales and associated response.

Network:

The sanctuary helps coordinate and works closely with NOAA Fisheries Office of Protected Resources, Pacific Islands Regional Office, Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center, and NOAA Office of Law Enforcement; Hawai'i's Department of Land and Natural Resources; the United States Coast Guard; the tour industry; researchers; fishermen; and others on receiving, and when appropriate, responding to reports of large whales in life-threatening entanglements.



Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National
Administration and the state of Hawai'i.



Entanglements

Synopsis

The 2018-2019 humpback whale season (November 1, 2018 – May 30, 2019) was the network's 17th season. Eleven (11) confirmed reports, representing at least nine different humpback whales, were received. Response efforts were mounted to three of the animals and as a result, two animals were actively freed of portions of their entangling gear. Over 400 feet of gear was removed, reducing the impact for these animals.

Response

Five authorized response efforts to three animals were mounted by the network. One effort was mounted during the government shutdown. Unfortunately, the animal was not re-located. The other four responses were to two different animals. One animal was freed of only a minimal amount of gear, but the other was freed of over 400 feet of line and buoys. All efforts were extremely difficult, with gear configurations, animal behavior, and conditions posing many challenges. While only a few response opportunities presented themselves, 11 network members did get hands-on experience working to free a whale.

Efforts involved Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary, NOAA

Fisheries Protected Resources, Hawai'i's Department of Land and Natural Resources, the U.S. Coast Guard, Kaho'olawe Island Reserve Commission, NOAA Corps, Ultimate Whale Watch, Pacific Whale Foundation, Oceanwide Science Institute, Cardinal Point Captains, University of Hawai'i – Hilo, Captain Steve's Rafting, Maui Dive Shop, Maui Princess, Bluewater Rafting, fishing vessel *Piper*, Blue Hawaiian Helicopters, Sunshine Helicopters, Holo Holo Charters, Maui Diamond II, Maui Magic, Redline, and many others.

Gear Investigation

Preliminary investigation of gear indicated two cases represented pot (trap) gear set off the northwest coast of North America. Unfortunately, the other cases provided little indication of the origin of the gear. One set was identified as Dungeness crab gear fished off Queen Charlotte Island, British Columbia, Canada. The surface buoy held an NTIF chip indicating the animal had at minimum carried the gear for 40 days. The other set represented the buoy line from a fish trap set off the Dutch Harbor area of Unalaska Island, along the Aleutian Islands of Alaska. Two entanglements were known to involve the mouth, while two other cases involved the tailstock region only. In the remaining five cases, the nature of the entanglement was not determined.

Humpback whale was cut free using a hooked knife attached to the end of a long pole. (NOAA MMHSRP permit # 18786-03)

Highlights:

- More than 70 hours of training was conducted.
- More than 15 hours of formal outreach towards increasing awareness was performed.
- Twenty-three (23) reports of entangled whales were received (12 unconfirmed and 11 confirmed), representing at least nine different humpback whales entangled in gear.
- The first confirmed large whale entanglement report of the season was January 10, while the last was March 7.
- Six (6) entangled whales were initially sighted within sanctuary waters.
- Reports were received off Kaua'i, O'ahu, and Maui Nui waters.
- Six (6) cases involved adults and three were subadults.
- Five (5) multi-agency, multi-asset responses were mounted to three different animals.
- More than 11 responders got hands-on experience working with entangled whales.
- Two (2) entangled whales had gear actively removed.
- Since 2003 the Hawai'i Network has freed 29 large whales from life-threatening entanglements, removing more than 12,000 feet of lines and netting.

What to do if you find an entangled whale

*Do not to approach closely or attempt to approach the animal or free it. While well-intentioned, freeing a 40-ton whale is extremely dangerous for the animal and the would-be rescuer. Getting in the water is especially dangerous. People have been killed. As a result, only trained and well-equipped responders that are authorized under NOAA Fisheries' Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program are permitted to disentangle whales. If you sight any marine mammal in distress, maintain 100 yards distance and please call the **NOAA Fisheries' 24/7 response Hotline at (888)256-9840**. If unable to call, please radio the U.S. Coast Guard on **VHF CH. 16**, and they will relay the report.*

Response activities are conducted under NOAA Fisheries' Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program Permit # 18786-03



Subadult humpback whale had a bridle of line through its mouth trailing more than 400 feet behind.



Adult humpback whale had line originating from the mouth, forming a bridle that trails to buoys and a Dungeness crab pot lying 100 feet below.



Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary is jointly managed by the

hawaiihumpbackwhale.noaa.gov

