



Mysterious Deaths of Harbor Porpoises on East Coast

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Common porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*).
Photo by Stephen Spotte, Mystic Marinelife Aquarium.

May 5, 1999 Solomons Island, Maryland - Between March and April 1999, more than 160 porpoises washed up dead or dying along the East Coast of the United States. The number of deaths tripled over 1998. Marine scientists are baffled about why the porpoises are dying in such numbers and plan to have a meeting in early June 1999 to compare research findings. I talked with Dr. Stephen J. Jordan, Director of the Sarbanes Cooperative Oxford Research Laboratory in Solomons Island, Maryland. His lab cooperates with the federal National Ocean Service and Dr. Jordan summarized what researchers know so far about the porpoise deaths.

Interview:

Stephen J. Jordan, Director, Sarbanes Cooperative Oxford Research Laboratory, Solomons Island, Maryland: "Between the 7th of March and the 20th of April, we had 19 harbor porpoises that stranded dead on Maryland beaches, mostly on Assateague or Ocean City, MD area. This is very unusual in that we normally wouldn't see more than 20 or so marine animal strandings of all species in a year. And here we had 19 harbor porpoises in a little over a month.

What about other states up and down the East Coast?

My understanding is that this has been a problem throughout the mid-Atlantic and into New England from North Carolina on up into Massachusetts that there were high numbers of harbor porpoise strandings.

I have a number of approximately 162...

Yeah, that sounds familiar.

Dead porpoises.

I believe in 11 of them we saw some evidence of net entanglement or what we call fishery interaction in jargon. The rest of them either couldn't be determined or there was no evidence of fishery problems. Now coast wide, it's my

understanding, that's not the case everywhere. There are some suspicions that there may be some disease problems.

In interviews I do with other scientists, the same theme comes up - that there are so many pesticides and chemical toxins in waters now that could be deteriorating the immune systems of animals, including marine life.

Right.

If there is an increase in disease, it could be related to the fact that their immune systems are so overwhelmed by toxins in the water that cycles of disease and death in marine life keep repeating.

That certainly is an emerging issue and it's not something that I'm an expert in. But it is conceivable that low levels of some of these compounds could be contaminating coastal waters and causing immune system problems. With marine mammals in particular, that's going to be a difficult issue to resolve because we're not permitted to just collect these animals and study them. Our only opportunities for research come in strandings. So, we're sort of handicapped in that respect.

Porpoises are far-ranging in the oceans. If toxins are increasing, the entire planet is faced with the clean up problem, right?

Well, certainly. And it's not just toxicity. It's not just chemical problems. But the problems of nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorous loads to the coastal ocean are very much an increasing concern and something that is an emerging issue we really have to keep our eye on. The fix for that is to figure out how to improve what we do on the land.

To reduce pesticide and fertilizer run off.

Exactly.

We are now at the beginning of May. This has been a series of unusual deaths among porpoises in the spring. What is the outlook for the summer and fall based on seasonal increases in ebbs and flows of marine life deaths?

That's an excellent question. The harbor porpoises have been migrating north and they are mostly out of our area now -- they've gone on up to New England, Maine and Nova Scotia area. Pretty soon we expect the bottle nosed dolphins to be coming along the coast. Those are larger animals. We don't know whether to expect a problem with dolphins or not. We're certainly keeping our eye on them. Normally, we have a few dolphin stranded each year, but certainly not high numbers. And we'll be watching that very closely.

If somebody is at a beach area and sees a porpoise or porpoises washing up on a beach or any other kind of marine animal, what is the correct action people should take?

First of all, people should not touch or approach these animals. If they are alive, they can certainly be dangerous and cause injuries. Whether they are alive or dead, they can occasionally transmit some diseases to humans, so Hands Off! is the first thing.

Secondly, call your local police department and dispatch should know what animal control office to contact for help."

Websites:

http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/prot_res/prot_res.html (National Marine Fisheries Service)

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