

Mercury contamination found in stranded Victorian dolphins

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Monash University research into heavy metal contaminant levels in dolphins from Port Phillip Bay and the Gippsland Lakes has revealed high mercury levels may be a contributing factor to dolphin deaths.

Researchers from the School of Biological Sciences have confirmed levels of mercury found in the dolphins were within a range considered to cause negative health and mental effects and were higher than mercury levels found in populations around the world.

Supervisory researcher Dr Ross Thompson said the mercury concentrations in 20 live and eight dolphins which died after becoming stranded, collected over the last two years, were measured by Honours student Alissa Monk. Levels in the dead dolphins averaged 3.45 milligrams of mercury per kilogram of tissue compared to 1.32 mg/kg in living dolphins.

"Mercury levels detected are sufficient to cause significant health impacts and were comparable to those found in areas of the world that are considered highly polluted, including the Mediterranean Sea," Dr Thompson said.

Mercury has been shown in previous national studies to bioaccumulate in dolphins, but this is the first study to find particularly high levels in stranded animals in coastal Victoria. Bioaccumulation is the food chain process whereby smaller fish containing mercury are eaten by larger mercury contaminated fish, which are then consumed by dolphins, who

can consume up to ten kilograms of fish a day. Mercury levels found in fish were considered low (

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