

Entangled gray whale off Calif. freed after chase

March 30 2012, By SUE MANNING , Associated Press



This image provided by the Pacific Marine Mammal Center shows a gray whale after it was freed from entanglement in derelict fishing gear in the Pacific Ocean off the Southern California coast near Redondo Beach. Rescuers in a small boat chased this migrating gray whale along the coast for hours Thursday, March 29, 2012, before they were able to cut off fishing traps, lines and debris wrapped around its tail. (AP Photo/Pacific Marine Mammal Center, Kelli Lewis)

(AP) -- A migrating gray whale with debris wrapped around its tail was finally freed after rescuers in a small boat chased it along the Southern California coast so they could cut away the fishing traps and lines.

The whale was spotted near Redondo Beach on Thursday morning. The disentanglement team would speed up, position its boat directly behind the whale, and then try to catch the tangle with a long rod with a blade on top.

The first half dozen attempts failed, said Kelli Lewis, education director of the Pacific Marine Mammal Center, who watched the rescue from a trailing Los Angeles County Lifeguard boat.

"As soon as he got the blade in and cut through it, the net and the drag from the buoy, everything popped off and the whale dove. Everybody cheered," Lewis said.

The team was able to recover the tangled mass and identified it as gear used in lobster or crab traps, with a long line attached and a flotation device at the top.

It was impossible to tell how long the whale had been tangled in the gear, Lewis said. The whale was a sub-adult, she said, somewhere between a first-year calf and a full-grown adult.

Grays are migrating north after wintering in Baja California lagoons.

The ensnared animal was initially spotted late Wednesday. Despite growing darkness and choppy seas, rescue workers were able to attach two orange buoys so the whale could be found Thursday.

Rescue crews cut mounds of gill nets off the tail of another gray whale over the weekend. There were sightings of a dead whale outside Long Beach Harbor on Wednesday, and rescue workers fear it may have been the weekend whale, Lewis said.

"That's something that happens with animals that get tangled in gear," Lewis said. "Their movements and ability to see are so inhibited they get malnourished, and the netting chaffs their skin, and they get infections. By the time we find them, they have been suffering for some time. It's not uncommon for them to die as a result of entanglement."

But sometimes they survive. "We have seen animals with scars from entanglement," Lewis said.

She was optimistic about Thursday's whale.

It was much healthier in its behavior than the weekend whale, she said.

"The one over the weekend was more lethargic and was not using its tail to move through the water," Lewis said. "Today's was showing quick movements and using its body properly. It didn't look too emaciated. We are hoping for the best on this one."

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