

Northern California fishermen free entangled whale

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This image provided April 17, 2012, by Capt. Daveís Dolphin and Whale Safari shows a gray whale entangled in netting in the waters off the coast of Southern California April 17, 2012. Federal wildlife officials say that a whale tangled in a large fishing line that went missing during previous rescue attempts has been freed by a fisherman. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration spokesman Jim Milbury says that a crabbing boat's captain and crew spotted the gray whale in the ocean off Bodega Bay on Thursday. Captain Mark Anello and his crew spent 90 minutes working to free the 40-ton mammal. (AP Photo/Capt. Daveís Dolphin and Whale Safari, file)

(AP) -- Crab fisherman Mark Anello noticed something odd near his boat off the Northern California coast: three buoys floating nearby were moving. Motoring closer he saw a gray whale tangled in a large fishing line.

It was the same whale, officials determined later, that was first spotted hundreds of miles south off the Orange County coast April 17, dragging several buoys attached to a net.

At that time, rescuers attempted to free the marine mammal, but it disappeared. It was spotted about a week later still entangled off the coast of Monterey County.

On Thursday, Anello was out on his 48-foot wooden crab boat about 3 1/2 miles off the coast of Sonoma County near Bodega Bay, located about 67 miles north of San Francisco.

As Anello, a fourth-generation fisherman, and two others on his boat the Point Ommaney moved closer, they found the orange and white buoys connected to the whale that measured close to the length of his vessel, said Tony Anello, Mark's father.

"They come up slowly alongside the whale, and the whale started fighting at first," the elder Anello said. "Then the whale decided to calm down."

Using 12-foot, bamboo poles with hooks on the end, Mark Anello and his crew spent 90 minutes freeing the 40-ton mammal, which had been nicknamed "June" by rescuers who had earlier tried to free it.

Once the creature was free from the ropes, nets and buoys it took a lap around the vessel.

"The whale circled the boat, surfaced and took off," Tony Anello said. "It was like it was saying thank you."

Monica DeAngelis, the federal marine mammal biologist who led earlier rescue attempts, says the National Oceanic and Atmospheric

Administration maintains a network of volunteer disentanglement teams trained to rescue animals in distress.

She said the captain and the crew that rescued June were not part of the network, and that in general she would advise anyone who encounters a tangled whale to report the animal's location and stay with it but wait for trained rescuers to arrive, not least because such a massive animal can be dangerous.

"They're actually quite fortunate that they did not get injured," DeAngelis said. Still, she called Anello a "steward of the sea."

"I'm not going to rain on their parade. They did something amazing, and they probably did save the life of this animal," she said.

Generally, tampering with [whales](#) qualifies as a federal offense under the [Marine Mammal](#) Protection Act. But DeAngelis said Anello and his crew were exempted under the law's "good Samaritan" clause.

Tony Anello echoed DeAngelis' fears, saying his son and crew could have been hurt by the large creature. But he also said while fishing gear was the cause of the whale's woe, many fishermen care deeply about the sea and a sustainable fishery.

"There are fishermen who care about the ocean," he said. "We are stewards of the ocean and want a sustainable fishery."

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