

Pregnancy-related infection kills endangered orca

December 16 2014, byPhuong Le

An endangered orca found dead off Vancouver Island in Canada earlier this month died after a failed pregnancy caused a bacterial infection, officials said Tuesday.

Preliminary necropsy results show the 19-year-old killer whale known as J-32 was pregnant with a nearly full-term female calf that died, Fisheries and Oceans Canada said.

"It appears that the baby was dead before the mom, and as a consequence of the fetal loss, there was a secondary bacterial infection of the lining of the uterus," said Stephen Raverty, a veterinary pathologist with British Columbia's Ministry of Agriculture who led the necropsy.

The orca was a member of the southern resident killer whale population that spends time in the inland waters of Washington state and Canada. They are an endangered species in Canadian and the U.S.

The whale was malnourished, but scientists haven't been able to determine yet whether that was related to the near-term stage of pregnancy, a secondary bacterial infection or other birthing complications, Raverty said.

Tissue samples from the necropsy will be sent to eight different laboratories across the two countries to help assess threats to the orca population. A final report is expected in the spring.

Those tests will look at the orca's blubber, stomach contents, organs and genetics, and analyze pathogens or diseases.

Scientists want to know why the calf died, why it wasn't aborted and why the infection set in, among other questions, said Brad Hanson, a wildlife biologist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration who participated in the necropsy.

"We not only lost her, but her reproductive potential," he said.

Orcas between the ages of 15 and 40 typically produce about four to six calves, but this whale had not produced a calf that survived. About half of calves die.

The death leaves 77 animals in the Puget Sound orca population. There hasn't been a successful birth in the population for 2 1/2 years, according to Ken Balcomb, a scientist with the Center for Whale Research in Friday Harbor who assisted in the necropsy.

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