



ABALONE WATCH

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Haida Gwaii Abalone Stewards



Council of the Haida Nation
Haida Fisheries Program



Laskeek Bay Conservation Society



World Wildlife Fund Canada



Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve
and Haida Heritage Site



Skidegate Band Council



Old Massett Village Council

Canada
Fisheries and Oceans Canada

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Environment Canada



Centre for Wildlife Ecology
Resource and Environmental Management
Simon Fraser University

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A local crew of volunteers and Haida Fisheries personnel help Paul Cottrell (DFO) and Stephen Raverty (BC pathologist, *pictured in lower photo*) perform a necropsy on young fin whale washed up at Miller Creek. *photos: Doug Cowen*

All Washed Up! by Jody Bissett

Passing by Chinikundl Creek in mid-September, you may have noticed a very pungent smell – that was because a 16 m long female fin whale had died and washed ashore on the Miller Creek beach September 16th, 2010. This same whale was sighted floating in Hecate Strait the week before and was pretty ripe when it landed!

In very short order the marine mammal attracted much attention. Stephen Raverty, a well known whale pathologist from the Department of Agriculture's Animal Health Centre, and Paul Cottrell, the regional marine mammal coordinator for Fisheries and Oceans Canada, were joined by local scientists and volunteers to dissect the giant animal. A full necropsy was performed and tissue samples were collected from the heart, skin, fat, stomach, intestines,

liver and reproductive organs. Samples will be analyzed to help experts figure out where the animal came from, what toxin loads it carried, and the contributing factors to death. This animal appeared to have been involved in a boat collision, however results to date cannot tell us whether this was the cause of its death.

Why all the fuss? Fin whales are listed as a threatened species and protected under the Species at Risk Act (SARA) in Canada because their numbers were greatly reduced by commercial whaling activities. Today they face different threats in the form of ship strikes, marine noise, pollution and entanglement in fishing gear. Fin whales are the second largest species of whale in the world, reaching a maximum size of 22 m and 100 years in age. The animal at

...All washed up! *continued*

Miller Creek was a sub-adult, a real loss to the dwindled population. The more we learn from her, the more we can help protect fin whales in the ocean.

When an animal of this size washes up on the beach, what can be done with the remains? Options include leaving the animal where it is, dragging it to a more remote location, sinking or burying it. In this case the whale was buried to allow it to decompose naturally. In a few years it will be dug up and the bones reassembled for display at the Haida Gwaii Museum at Kaay Llnagaay. Necropsy volunteers carefully enclosed the pectoral fins in wire mesh so that the small bones (equivalent of our hand bones) would not get lost as the skeleton was resurrected.

If you ever come across a dead or in-distress marine mammal, please call the toll free BC Marine Mammal Incident Reporting Hotline at: 1-800-465-4336. This line is manned 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and will put you in direct contact with the Marine Mammal Response Network.

Marine Exploration for All the Senses

by Sharon Jeffery

An evening ripe with seafood snacks, yummy desserts and exciting stories from the shores and kelp forests of Haida Gwaii awaited those who came to the Dixon Entrance Museum in Masset on Wednesday, September 29th. Local caterer Alice Montjoy provided a delectable array of treats; biologist and PhD student, Lynn Lee, shared underwater images and natural history stories from her work in local kelp forests this summer; and Parks Canada ecologist, Carita Bergman, wrapped up the event with a tale of Black Oystercatchers and how they may be impacting the abalone population.

According to Bergman, abalone have never before been documented in the diet of Black Oystercatchers, despite numerous studies of their diet up and down the coast. However, recent collections of prey remains from the nesting sites of these birds in Haida Gwaii showed that 40% of nests contained abalone shells, and that in comparison to their availability in the intertidal, abalone were a preferred food for nesting oystercatchers. Diet studies conducted 20 years ago by the Laskeek Bay Conservation Society of these same long-lived birds did

not show the birds dining on abalone back then. Abalone have recently been recommended to be uplisted to endangered status because their populations have shown no sign of recovery despite 20 years of a fisheries closure. The appearance of abalone shells in the diet of an intertidal forager may be a sign that oystercatchers have detected an increase in the abalone population that we humans have not been able to measure yet.

Should we be concerned that oystercatchers are consuming small abalone and potentially limiting their recovery? Bergman thinks so! She hypothesizes that abalone might be caught in what is called a ‘predator pit’ where the majority of abalone near oystercatcher nesting sites are consumed once they reach reproductive size, which may prevent a large proportion of the population from maturing to a larger size. Bergman speculates that a number of terrestrial predators eat abalone from the intertidal, including crows, ravens, eagles and river otters. How these predators affect the ability of the entire abalone population to recover back to a post fishery level remains to be seen – a story we can all watch unfold as the tide rises and falls.

Have you seen one?!

photo: C. Gotschalk

Basking sharks are the second largest fish in the world, reaching a maximum length of 12.2m (40 feet). The basking shark is easily distinguished from other sharks by its large size, gill slits that wrap around its entire head, pointed snout, large mouth with minute teeth and crescent-shaped caudal fin. These gentle giants only eat tiny animals called plankton. Once abundant off our coast, they are now listed as endangered in BC waters.

If you have ever seen a basking shark – no matter where or how long ago – report it at www.pac.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/SharkSightings or call 1-877-50-SHARK. If possible, take photographs so that we can verify the sighting. Good quality photographs of dorsal fins can be used to identify individuals. Sightings records are an important first step to helping species at risk. Your information will help up to determine how many basking sharks exist off of our coast and the potential for recovery of these impressive animals.

