

Plastic, golf ball found in dead whale

Stomach contents reveal dangers of 'industrial' dining

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OLYMPIA, Wash. - A gray whale that died after getting stranded on a West Seattle beach had a large amount of garbage in its stomach — ranging from plastic bags to a pair of sweat pants and even a golf ball.

Most of the whale's stomach contents was algae — typical of the bottom-feeding mammals. But Cascadia Research Collective, whose experts were among those who performed the necropsy, said "a surprising amount of human debris" was found, including "more than 20 plastic bags, small towels, surgical gloves, sweat pants, plastic pieces, duct tape, and a golf ball."

On top of all that, the whale "also had cuts on the head possibly from a boat propeller," the group said in a statement. It added, though, that "these did not appear fresh or deep enough to have been involved in the death of the animal."

Cascadia emphasized that no evidence suggested the trash was responsible for the whale's death, but added: "It did clearly indicate that the whale had been attempting to feed in industrial waters and therefore exposed to debris and contaminants present on the bottom in these areas."

"Gray whales are filter feeders that typically feed on the bottom and suck in sediment in shallow waters and filter the contents to strain out the small organisms that live there," Cascadia said. "They have been known to accumulate material including rocks and other debris from the bottom ingested in this process. While debris has been found in the stomachs of some previous gray whales found dead in Puget Sound, this appeared to be a larger quantity than had ever been found previously."

Cascadia co-founder John Calambokidis, a biologist, said the debris was a reminder of human impacts

below the water.

"Even with all our awareness and attempts to improve the Sound, there is still quite a legacy of our past behavior and current behavior that still exists down there on the bottom," NBC affiliate KING TV reported him as saying.

Testing of samples collected from the whale could shed light on the cause of death but results will not be known for several weeks.

A local community college hopes to preserve the skeleton.

The 37-foot-long male beached itself last Wednesday. It was the fifth gray whale to have died this year in Washington state and the fourth in Puget Sound in April.

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