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# Beached 45-foot whale may have died naturally

BY PAUL ROGERS  
Mercury News Staff Writer

A 45-foot humpback whale that washed up on a beach near Greyhound Rock in rural northern Santa Cruz County probably died of natural causes, researchers say.

The whale, which weighed an estimated 50 tons, had been dead for at least two weeks when waves rolled it onto the beach Tuesday afternoon, said Doreen Moser, a graduate student at Moss Landing Marine Laboratory.

Greyhound Rock is six miles north of Davenport in a rugged area near the Santa Cruz-San Mateo county line.

Moser and about 15 other researchers spent Wednesday performing a necropsy, or animal autopsy, on the decomposing carcass.

The animal, a full-grown adult, showed no signs of entanglement in fishing lines, nor did it bear teeth marks from killer whales, which have been photographed attacking other whales in Monterey Bay this year.

"It's really tough to say what happened," said Moser. "It could have just died from old age and washed up in the surf."

The whale was seen bobbing in the surf earlier this week. Passersby said it washed up Tuesday.

Sean Van Sommeran, operations director of the Pelagic Shark Research Foundation, a Santa Cruz

group, said it appears the whale was attacked by a great white shark, probably after it died.

"The shark really did a number on it," said Van Sommeran. "Bones were broken in the whale's head. I was amazed."

Bite marks were three feet wide, suggesting that the shark that attempted to feed on the dead whale was 14 to 16 feet long, said Van Sommeran.

Humpbacks have been spotted regularly this year in Monterey Bay and off the Farallon Islands. Two weeks ago, another dead humpback washed up off Point Reyes National Seashore in Marin County.

Humpback whales are listed as an endangered species. Their population in the northern Pacific is estimated at between 1,500 and 2,500. They breed in Mexico in the winter months and return to waters off Northern California, Oregon and Alaska. In addition to Moss Landing Marine Lab, whale experts also came from Long Marine Lab in Santa Cruz, the University of California, Davis, the Marine Mammal Center of Sausalito and the Pelagic Shark Research Foundation.

State parks crews are scheduled to bury the animal this morning with bulldozers. Researchers cut off its fluke, a section of tail with patterns that have been compared to a human fingerprint, and will try to identify the animal from photographs of about 350 Pacific humpbacks on file.