

Unnatural death

WHALES and
Whaling



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

The female gray whale probably died of exhaustion, a biologist said.

Gill net killed whale

By TOM LONG
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5-23-90

SANTA CRUZ — A 30-foot female gray whale that washed up dead on a north coast beach late Sunday drowned after losing its fight with a fishing net, a marine biologist said Tuesday.

"It was probably exhaustion that resulted in her drowning," said Graham Worthy, a marine biologist at UC Santa Cruz's Long Marine Lab.

Worthy said the whale, which was first seen floating dead about a quarter mile off the coast on Saturday, might have fought the gill net wrapped around its tail for as long as two weeks before finally dying. "It would be a long, slow process," he said.

The whale washed up on Red, White and Blue Beach, between Davenport and Santa Cruz, Sunday

evening with netting, an anchor and floats wrapped around its fluke or tail. Worthy said the female looked to be 5-6 years old, just entering its reproductive years. According to Worthy, gray whales have a natural life expectancy of 30-40 years.

Gill nets are used to collect fish from the bottom of the sea. According to Worthy, the nets commonly trap other forms of marine life as well as the fish.

"They are indiscriminate killers," Worthy said. "They've been described as basically strip mining the ocean."

The dead whale, black with spatters of white barnacles and open sores where it is beginning to decompose, lay dead center on the clothing-option-

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Whale

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al beach Tuesday. It's giant tongue hung out one side of its mouth as people walked around it, ignoring its smell while wondering at its hugeness.

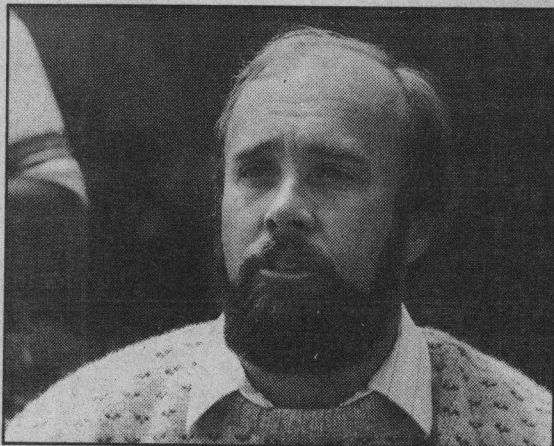
"Death of any kind isn't particularly pleasant and that's a tough way to see something like this go," said Bob Bartels of Martinez, referring to the net still entwined about the giant mammal's tail. Bartels had come to the beach specifically to see the dead whale.

Worthy said that about 20 gray whales a year drown after being caught in gill nets along California's coast. The nylon filament nets are also responsible for the deaths of about 3,000 sea lions, 2,000 harbor porpoises and countless sea birds along the coast annually, Worthy said.

The nets are the targets of a voters' initiative expected to be on the November ballot. That initiative would ban gill nets along much of the central and northern coast of California.

"I'm a bit surprised (at this whale's death) because we've worked to keep the gill nets out of the whale migration paths," said Zeke Grader, executive director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Association in San Francisco.

Grader said that whales can break through most types of gill nets currently being used along California's coast. "Most of the heavy nets we've been



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Biologist Graham Worthy said whale may have died long, slow death.

finding have been coming out of Mexico," Grader said.

Worthy said that it was possible the whale had gotten entangled as far away as Mexico and simply fought the net's weight while swimming north, but he said the net had no identifying features and could have come from anywhere along the coast.

"It's frustrating, it's irritating, it makes me mad," said Worthy. "It's difficult to rationalize a kind of fishing that is indiscriminate in its catch."