

Task Force to tackle future whale 'visits'

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KOTA KINABALU: The Borneo marine Institute has identified a Task Force and Action Plan to deal with future stranding of whales in Sabah, Prof. Dr Saleem Mustafa, Director of the Borneo Marine research Institute, UMS.

"We have discussed the issue and decided to come out with a standard operation manual which provides a roadmap on how to deal with stranded whales, such as mobilising, supervising rescue and rehabilitation of stranded whales," Prof Saleem said.

"One obvious issue is how to handle such a big animal and crowd management which presents lots of problems," he said.

"We first need to push them back to sea to keep them alive because once they are outside water, they suffer dyhydration," he said.

The team of Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) marine scientists believed an "unknown illness" caused the stranding of the 52ft (15.80m) on a sandy beach at the mouth of the Setompok river near Kuala Penyu, last Thursday.

Since a necropsy (autopsy on animal) on such a huge monster is too complex for local marine biologists, the real cause of stranding may never be known.

Kuala Penyu residents and fisheries staff found the whale alive in the morning of Aug. 2 during low tide at about 9am but the whale died at 8pm the same day.

"With the help of the local community, we tried to push the whale back to sea but the 10-tonne animal was not only too big but showed no interest in returning to deeper water," said Prof. Dr Saleem Mustafa, Director of the Borneo Marine research Institute, UMS.

The UMS research team comprising Dr Julian Ransangan, Dr John Madin and Muhammad Ali Syed Hussein said in a joint report, said the whale "appeared emaciated (physically haggard, gaunt and wasted)."

A quick external examination also found a few recovering wounds and many blisters on the skin throughout the body which was possibly due to past injuries and long exposure to sunlight.

"In the light of these observations and the fact that the whale was unable to swim despite efforts to pull it to deeper water during the rescue effort, we believe the main cause was unknown illness," they said.

"However, other factors such as extreme weakness and old age could not be ruled out," they said.

"But based on records, Sabah has the most counts of whale stranding, compared to our immediate region," said Dr John Madin.

"Exactly what drives most stranding to Sabah is not scientifically known," said Prof Dr Saleem Mustafa.

The last stranding in Sabah involved a 40ft baleen whale in mid February this year in Pulau Mengalum, which came shortly after another 50-footer stranded on the same island towards the end of 2011.

Of course, the most publicised previous stranding centred on a 66-ft Bryde's whale (Dr Julian Ransangan said it was later identified as a Blue whale) on December 15, 2006, at Lokurai, near Pulau Gaya, just opposite Kota Kinabalu.

Asked if active sonar may account for this



Prof Saleem



Dr Madin

apparently rising whale stranding frequency in Sabah, Prof Saleem said there was no evidence to support that, citing no active sonar activity from the Royal Malaysian Navy that time but it should not be discounted due to escalating naval rivalry in the South China Sea.

But only a necropsy which involves cutting into the massive head of the whale to look for signs of barotrauma (barosinusitis) can unveil evidence or absence of evidence whether damage has been inflicted to the whale's biosonar - its key navigational system, from sudden excessive changes to the water pressure coming from a possible burst of active military sonar or seismic air cannons used by the nearby offshore oil operations.

Prof Saleem said UMS did not have the facility to do such necropsy at present. Further external examination indicated the latest stranding is a female, Dr John Madin said

All defining characteristics identified it as a Bryde's whale, based on distinctive morphological features of the animal such as the presence of rostral ridges on its snout, head coloration and approximately 300-700 slate-grey baleen plates, shape of the dorsal fin and the presence of twin blow holes, characteristic of baleen whales, according to the scientific report.

UMS will perform a DNA analysis of the tissue samples collected to provide "concrete proof" of the species, Prof Saleem noted.

Unlike predatory whales which often move in a social group to enhance hunting successes, Bryde's whales are filter feeder which can find food alone by simply opening its mouth while cruising to capture plankton, small crustaceans that are filtered through a baleen - a brush-like structure and occasionally fed on small fish such as anchovy, mackerels, pilchards and sardine.

Which explains why baleen whales are not given to mass stranding like more socially cohesive whale species, Prof Saleem explained.

But Prof Saleem raised alert on a looming problem of acidification of the oceans caused excessive sinking of carbon dioxide into the seas, will have serious impact on whale populations.

Directly, poor pH of seawater will disturb the physiology of the whales.

Indirectly, it will change the biogeographical distribution of the animal, it will change the prey composition, the prey abundance and foraging grounds leading to decrease in whale population," he said.

He cited reduction of shrimps or krills which constitute a major food source of filter feeder whales because shrimps will eventually find it difficult to form shells when sea water become too acidic.