

ON THE STRANDING OF SPERM WHALES AT NAGAPATTINAM, TAMIL NADU COAST*

In the Indian Ocean, the sperm whale *Physeter macrocephalus* Linnaeus are found concentrated more in the Arabian Sea upto 20°N and between 50° and 80°E especially in the Gulf of Aden and approaches a little east of Minicoy Island and off Sri Lanka. Most of the records on the whales along the Indian coasts are on their strandings only. The present report deals with

the stranding of two sperm whales near Nagapattinam along the Tamil Nadu coast. On 18th December, 1988, the fishermen at Samnathanpettai near Nagapattinam noticed a whale in the sand silt surf region struggling to get back into the sea. The whale was in dying condition and had some injuries in the caudal peduncle region. Some fishermen tied the whale with ropes

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TABLE 1. Morphometric measurements (in cm) of the sperm whales stranded at Nagapattinam

Body characters	Sperm whale I	Sperm whale II
Total length (tip of snout to tip of caudal fin)	371	970
Tip of snout to the notch of caudal fluke	310	880
Tip of snout to origin of dorsal fin	192	515
Length of dorsal fin base	32	165
Maximum height of dorsal fin (hump)	—	25
Origin of dorsal fin to caudal fluke	—	340
Tip of snout to anterior insertion of flipper	100	260
Length of flipper	28	67
Length of outer curvature of flipper	47	—
Maximum breadth of flipper	19	—
Tip of snout to bifurcation origin of lower jaw	65	—
Length between flipper and caudal fluke	—	510
Breadth of snout	38	115
Length of upper jaw	50	155
Length of lower jaw	40	150
Tip of snout to centre of blow-hole	49	130
Breadth of blow-hole	4	—
Tip of snout to centre of eye	71	186
Eye diameter	5	5
Tip of snout to centre of anus	227	620
Length between anus and notch of caudal fluke	128	270
Tip of snout to centre of genital slit	—	693
Length between genital slit and anus	26	73
Body depth at the origin of flipper	61	280
Body depth at caudal peduncle	28	—
Girth at origin of dorsal fin	52	310
Girth at origin of anus	—	210
Length of intestine	—	1450
Estimated weight (tonnes)	0.7	5.0
Sex	Female	Female

around the throat region and towed it to the shore where it died after five hours. Based on the morphometric characters (Table 1), the whale was identified as a baby female sperm whale, *Physeter macrocephalus* Linnaeus measuring 3.71 m and weighing about 700 kg. The length at birth of sperm whale is about 4 m. Therefore it may be inferred that the present sperm whale is a new born baby less than three months old (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. The sperm whale stranded at Samnathanpettai near Nagapattinam.

Another sperm whale was found dead and washed ashore at Vizhunthamavadi near Nagapattinam on 18th January, 1991. The stranded sperm whale was an young female of 9.70 m weighing about 5 tonnes and estimated to be around five years old (Fig. 2). The stomach was cut open and found empty. The Tamil Nadu Fisheries Department made arrangements to bury the whale near the sandy shores at Vizhunthanavadi, to retrieve the skeleton. The head accounted for about one third of the animal's length and behind it the body tapered to the tail flukes. The lower jaw was very narrow



Fig. 2. The sperm whale stranded at Vizhunthamavadi near Nagapattinam.

and did not reach the end of the snout. On the lower jaw, there were two rows of budding teeth each row consisting of 22 teeth. The eyes were closed to the angle of mouth and behind it, the large rounded flipper. The colour of the whale was jet black with flippers lighter in shade.

It may be seen from the published information that strandings of sperm whales are more common along the east coast than the west coast. Another fact is that most of the strandings of the sperm whales have occurred during the months of November and December.