



MARINE FISHERIES INFORMATION SERVICE



Technical and Extension Series

CENTRAL MARINE FISHERIES RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Vol. 104

April, May, June 1990

COCHIN, INDIA

INDIAN COUNCIL OF AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH

ON A SPERM WHALE LANDED AT KALPENI ISLAND WITH NOTES ON AMBERGRIS *

INTRODUCTION

The sperm whale *Physeter macrocephalus* Linnaeus is widely distributed in the oceans though it prefers warm waters of tropical and sub-tropical regions. In the Indian Ocean it is 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. In recent years it has been reported from the mainland of India particularly from the Gulf of Mannar and from the coast of Sri Lanka.

Although this species occurs upto a little east of Minicoy, it has not so far been reported from the Lakshadweep due to the isolation and remoteness of the islands.

The following are the details of the sperm whales landed at various islands in the Lakshadweep.

On 25 - 2 - '71, the fishermen in the pablo boats sent by the Fisheries Department for fishing from Kalpeni Island, saw a sperm whale in sluggish motion near the main entrance of Kalpeni lagoon. The caudal flukes of the whale got entangled in the drift net and the animal could not move. The fishermen harpooned the whale and tied it to the boat with a rope and brought it to the shore (Fig. 1 B). Some of the measurements taken in cm are given below:

Total length	530
Height of the body	98
Girth of the body	62
Length of lower jaw	60
Length of flipper	60
Distance from eye to snout	115

After removing the blubber, the flesh was cut into small slices for human consumption.

During November, '82 a large dead sperm whale (Fig. 2) was stranded at Cheriyan shore lying close to Kalpeni Island. Due to putrefication the intestine burst and about 150 kg of ambergris was collected.

The anterior portion of a decomposed sperm whale was washed ashore at Chetlat Island on 22 - 12 '83. The total length of the half portion measured 500 cm and maximum diameter was 2 m.

Another small dead sperm whale was stranded again at Chetlat Island on 7 - 8 - '84. Total length of the whale was 550 cm and the height of the body was 220 cm.

The last record was the one from the northern extremity of Chetlat Island on 19 - 11 - 1986 Fig. 1 A. It had two wounds one on the head and the other on the right side just below the lower jaw. May be it was



Fig. 1. A. Sperm whale stranded at Chetlat Island on 19-11-86.
B. Sperm whale brought to the shore at Kalpeni Island.

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and K. C. S. Panicker, Dept. of Fish., U. T. of Lakshadweep.

hit by the propellor of a sailing vessel since Chetlat Island lies along the navigation channel for larger vessels. Twenty four teeth were seen arranged in two rows on the lower jaw.

AMBERGRIS

In Lakshadweep, three qualities of ambergris viz., *Ponnamber*, *Puvamber* and *Minamber* meaning gold, flower and fish having yellow, light green and black colour respectively are known. Ambergris is a valuable substance obtained from the sperm whale. It is either found floating in the sea or obtained by cutting open the animal. It is produced in the intestine and retained mostly in the colon. Ambergris is a solid inflammable waxy substance. When fresh, it has an offensive odour but gives off sweet earthy odour on drying. It has the property to absorb, intensify and stabilise the volatile and delicate fragrance. Therefore, it is extensively used in the perfume industry as a fixative. It also finds use in Ayurvedic and Homcopathy systems of medicine. The rich people in the Gulf use it as an aphrodisiac.

In this article some information on the ambergris collected from the Lakshadweep are given. As noted earlier, the Islanders are well aware of the product. In fact every year pieces of ambergris are washed ashore especially during the post-monsoon period. Ambergris is found as small pieces weighing 50 g to 30 kg from the lagoon or shores of various islands. In 1973, the boat crew of the Fisheries Department sighted a huge block of ambergris drifting in the open sea. It looked like a burnt and charred lower portion of a coconut tree trunk. The market rate at that time was Rs.2,000/- per kg. Another huge block weighing about 150 kg was recovered by a private Pablo boat belonging to Agatti Island during the same period while conducting Tuna fishing. From the stomach of a dead sperm whale stranded at Cheriyan shore very near to Kalpeni Island, about 50 kg. of ambergris was recovered. Several people got ambergris in lesser quantities from the same whale afterwards. A small lump weighing below 20 kg was recovered near Kavaratti Island by fishermen in 1980. In 1974 ambergris weighing 90 kg was found floating in the sea and it was auctioned at the rate of Rs. 1,160 per kg. Of this amount, 55% was paid to the fisherman who recovered it and 45% was credited to the Fisheries Department.

REMARKS

When James and Manivasagam (1980) reported about the stranding of a sperm whale from Mahabalipuram there were only two earlier records from India.

During the course of one decade, 13 more instances of stranding have been recorded. In four instances, the whales were found struggling in shallow waters to get back into the sea. It is unfortunate that instead of towing them back into the sea the fishermen brought them to the shore for ambergris and also to exhibit and get whatever little money that was possible as they have done at Mahabalipuram. Sperm whales being endangered animals should not be brought to the shore and killed. In one case it has been harpooned and dragged to the shore. They are stranded in all the months of the year except in May, July, September and October. Out of the 17 strandings, seven took place during November and December which shows the effect of northeast monsoon when the sea is rough and strong winds prevail. In Lakshadweep also, out of the five strandings, three took place during November and December. In the Gulf of Mannar, out of the three strandings, one took place in November. On the east coast it was stranded on eleven occasions and on the west coast only once at Karwar. Of the eleven stranding four were again during November and December. This clearly shows that November and December are vulnerable months for the strandings of the sperm whales. Another interesting feature about the stranding is that they get into creeks and backwaters as in the case of specimens stranded in Astamudi lake, Kodibag and Peddaganjapallipalem for shelter. James and Soundararajan (1979) have stated that the meat of sperm whale is not edible because it contains adipocure but in Lakshadweep, the meat of the sperm whales is cut into small slices and dried for human consumption.



Fig. 2. Anterior portion of a sperm whale stranded at Kalpeni during Nov. '82.

TABLE 1. Information on the strandings of sperm whales from the Indian region

Date	Place	Length (cm)	Sex	Reference	Remarks
January, 1890	Madras	731	-	Balanford (1891)	No details except that it was killed by Enprates.
25-2-1971	Kalpeni lagoon (Lakshadweep)	530	-	Present report	The flesh of the whale after the removal of blubber was cut into small slices for human consumption.
23-6-1973	Karwar	837	Female	Antony Raja and Pai (1973)	Dead. Bleeding profusely from a wound at the base of jaw. A small chunk of flesh cut on the back immediately behind the dorsal fin.
July, 1979	Manauli Island	1,735*	Male	James and Soundararajan (1979)	reported that some quantity of ambergris was recovered from the intestine.
12-4-1980	Mahabalipuram (Near Madras)	670	Male	James and Manivasagam (1980)	Live specimen struggling in the water was brought to the shore.
30-4-1980	Krusadai Island (Gulf of Mannar)	610	Male	James and Soundararajan (1979)	Dead and washed ashore but the specimen was intact.
25-11-1980	Puthenthuruth Island (Ashtamudi lake, near Quilon)	555	-	Bande <i>et al.</i> (1980)	It was live and making distress sounds in two metres depth water. It was tied to a rope and dragged to the shore by fishermen.
8-6-1982	Pudupatinam (Near Tranquebar)	906	Male	Nammalwar and Thanapathi (1982)	Found struggling in the surf region and making distress calls. Towed to the shore by fishermen.
November, 1982	Cheriyam shore (Close to Kalpeni Island, Lakshadweep)	Not recorded	-	Present report	Due to disintegration the intestine burst and 150 kg of ambergris came out of it.
22-12-1982	Chetlat Island (Lakshadweep)	500	-	Present report	Only anterior half of the decomposed whale was stranded. Maximum diameter was 2 m).
15-12-1983	Peddaganjapallipalem, Chirala Taluk, Prakasam District, Andhra Pradesh)	1100	-	Anonymous (1983)	Width of the whale was 1.5 m and height was 1.2 m (Personal communication : T. Chandrasekhara Rao).
7-8-1984	Chetlat Island (Lakshadweep)	550	-	Present report	Height of the whale was 2.2 m.
5-11-1986	Hare Island (Gulf of Mannar)	950	-	Sivadas <i>et al.</i> (1987)	Only skull and lower jaw could be examined. Length given is estimated.
19-11-1986	Chetlat Island (Lakshadweep)	1,035	-	Present report	The dead sperm whale had two wounds, one on its head and the other on the right side just below the lower jaw. Twenty four teeth were arranged in two rows on the lower jaw.
3-12-1986	Pondicherry	550	Female	Nammalwar <i>et al.</i> (1989) (In press)	— — —
8-3-1988	Kasimedu (Near Madras)	390	Female	Nammalwar <i>et al.</i> (1989)	Struggling in the fishing area and later stranded near the shore.
1-2-1989	Neelankarai (Near Madras)	1,060	Female	Nammalwar <i>et al.</i> (1989)	-

* Estimated length.

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