

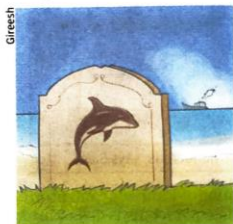


## Reporting up? Dolphin carcasses keep washing up on state's shores

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**Kochi:** Is the Kerala coast turning into a graveyard for dolphins? The number of dolphin carcasses washing ashore in the state is on the rise — 18 were recorded last year, up from 12 in 2023. This year, around four carcasses have been reported so far, including two in Thrissur, in which forest officials suspect the sinking of a cargo vessel carrying hazardous material off the Alappuzha coast may have played a role.

Of the 18 dolphins found last year, nine were males and two females, while the gender of the rest could not be identified due to decomposition. Notably, six strandings were reported in Aug alone. Seven of last year's carcasses were recovered in the Kozhikode



forest territorial division.

The carcasses found along the Kerala coast are of Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins, a species listed under Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972. Experts in marine mammal research attribute the rising trend to increased awareness about reporting of strandings, intensive fishing activities, underwater noise pollution from the growing num-

ber of vessels and interactions between dolphins and vessels.

"Dolphins used to drift ashore in the region earlier also, but their reporting was comparatively less. Marine mammals die in sea for various reasons: vessel strikes, entanglement as bycatch, old age, disease and pollution. After death, the carcass either sinks or drifts ashore. With coastal communities now more aware of these species and their significance, almost all strandings are being reported," said R Ratheesh Kumar, a senior scientist with the marine biodiversity and environment management division of the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI).

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## Rough seas disrupt dolphin communication

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Ratheesh Kumar said the stranding of the marine mammal carcass was observed to be comparatively high on our coast during the monsoon. "This is due to the drifting of carcasses mostly to the coastal region as the monsoon winds are towards the coast. Also, the rough seas during the monsoon disrupt dolphins, which rely on sound for communication, navigation and hunting, increasing the chances of them being accidentally struck by vessels," he said.

Fishermen are well aware that killing dolphins is a serious offence. "They don't target dolphins, but these mammals sometimes get caught in fishing nets. Dolphins, which breathe through lungs, need to come to the sea surface every 8 to

12 minutes to breathe. When they get stuck in nets, they cannot surface to breathe, which can lead to death. The carcasses that do not sink may eventually wash ashore," he said.

Veterinary officials conduct autopsies on these carcasses to determine the cause of death. Chief wildlife warden Pramod G Krishnan, who was part of the Project Dolphin launched by the Union govt in 2020, said a land-based model of conservation with a species-centric approach is not suitable for marine species. "We need a marine conservation template, keeping in mind the fishermen community, their livelihood and conservation needs. For dolphins to survive, we need to ensure that the livelihood requirements of people are met. We need to involve scientific institutions as well," he said.