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Baleen whale strandings increase tenfold in 10 yrs

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Kochi: There is a tenfold increase in the stranding of baleen whales in the last decade along the southwest coast of India, triggering an urgent need for region-specific conservation strategies in the face of climate change.

According to a study conducted by the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute of India (CMFRI), the stranding from 2004 to 2023 was examined, and it was found that two whale subspecies, B. brydei and B. edeni, saw a spike from 0.3% per year during 2003-2013 to 3% per year during 2014-2023. The latest primary survey conducted in 2023 alone registered nine whale strandings, the highest in recent years, mainly reported between Aug and Nov.

Karnataka recorded the highest stranding rates, followed by Kerala and northern Maharashtra, making them the hotspots of the stranding events. Southern Maharashtra and Goa showed few to no stranding events, said the study published in 'Regional Studies in Marine Science'. "During the southwest monsoon season, the ocean currents are also high, the sea is turbulent and often they get hit by ships or injured. Strong converging currents also drag the weak or dead animals to shore," said R Ratheesh Kumar, principal investigator of the Marine Mammal Stock Assessments in India project.

He said the study recommended real-time alerts and marine megafauna conservation networks. It called for providing training for fishers and officials and improving citizen science platforms for data collection, which are also critical.

High vessel traffic, fishing activity, environmental factors and shallow coastal shelves were identified as contributing factors. Increased social media attention and citizen reporting also increased the reporting of stranding events.

Another notable finding was the increased incidences of strandings during the monsoon season. Scientists said that this could also be related to the chlorophyll concentrations, which meant the presence of food for these big mammals.

The study found that chlorophyll-a concentration, a marker of ocean productivity during the southwest monsoon, had a positive correlation to whale stranding. This suggests that whales are drawn closer to coastal feeding grounds during the monsoon when nutrient upwelling increases plankton and fish abundance.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

- Ship strikes, noise pollution and habitat degradation
- Sea surface temperature and rising ocean temperature, which cause ecological disruptions
- Increasing plankton and fish abundance in monsoon due to nutrient upwelling

Whales are drawn closer to coastal feeding grounds during monsoon