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Whale strandings along country's southwest coast rose tenfold in past decade

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Kerala, Karnataka and Goa are key hotspots with high vessel traffic, fishing activity and environmental factors to blame

THERE HAS been a tenfold increase in the stranding of whales along India's southwest coast in the last decade, a study conducted by the ICAR-Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI) has found.

CMFRI said the increase underscored the urgent need for region-specific conservation strategies in the face of climate change. It said stranding of whales, which was just 0.3 per cent per year during 2003-2013, grew to 3 per cent per year during 2014-2023, following a range of issues including changes in ocean ecosystems and anthropogenic factors.

Besides, the latest primary survey conducted in 2023 alone registered nine whale strandings, the highest in recent years, mainly reported between August and November.

The study was led by Dr R Ratheesh Kumar, the principal investigator of the national research project on 'Marine Mammal Stock Assessments in India'. It was published in Regional Studies in Marine Science.

Kerala, Karnataka and Goa emerged as the key hotspots for whale stranding, accounting for most of the reported events. 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 reporting of such events.

The study highlighted that noise pollution, ship strikes, and habitat degradation are elevating risks for this endangered fauna.

The study identified Bryde's whale as the most commonly stranded species, with blue whales also found occasionally. It also observed the genetic complexity of Bryde's whales along the Indian coast, confirming that two distinct forms of the species are present in Indian waters.

On the link between whale stranding and environmental indicators, 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.

Sea surface temperature and rising ocean temperature were causing ecological disruptions that increased stranding, and strong converging currents also drag the weak or dead animals to shore, said the study.

The study called for building robust marine mammal conservation infrastructure, especially in biodiversity hotspots like the southwest coast. It recommended real-time alerts, marine megafauna conservation networks, training for fishers and officials, and improving citizen science platforms for data collection.