

## WITHOUT RESEARCH, DOLPHIN DEATHS CONTINUE TO PUZZLE MARINE BIOLOGISTS, EXPERTS

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By **Gitanjali Das**

The frequent instances of dead dolphins washing ashore could be due to manmade causes rather than natural ones, say marine biologists studying the ecological impact of the city on coastal marine life.

Between April 21 and May 26 alone, carcasses of five humpback dolphins, a finless porpoise and a sea turtle were found at Marine Drive, Nariman Point, Versova and Prabhadevi beaches.

Experts say the reasons could range from 'ghost nets' (fishing nets abandoned after they get snagged on rocks underwater) and excessive fishing to rise in boat traffic, offshore oil exploration, sewage and effluents released into the sea illegally.

However, without a detailed post-mortem of the carcasses before they decompose, they point out that affixing man-made reasons to their deaths is difficult, as in the case of the dolphin carcass that civic workers disposed of at the Deonar dumping grounds recently. The post-mortem could reveal a morbillivirus infection that can be passed on from mother to calves and affects vital organs, or parasites that cause brain cysts. Only after ruling natural causes out can man-made reasons like pollution be probed, says wildlife veterinarian Dr Dr Yuvraj Kaginkar.

Mirror accessed four such post-mortem reports, but none mentioned the exact cause of death. "We have sent the reports to the state pollution control board and the Kalina forensic laboratory, but a response will take around two months," said Anil Toradmal, range forest officer, Mumbai Range.

The lack of a dolphin census, or even a rough estimate of their numbers, adds to the challenge. The Konkan Cetacean Research Team (KCRT) researching marine life in Sindhudurg said their members have sighted around 674 dolphins and identified 150 .

The KCRT is working on the UNDP-backed Sindhudurg Cetacean Project, which includes looking at abundance estimates of the Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins. "Till we don't know how many dolphins exist in our coastal waters, even one death is something to worry about," said KCRT member Mihir Sule.

N Vasudevan, chief conservator of forests (Mangrove Cell), recently wrote to the BMC commissioner requesting that marine animal deaths be reported to the forest department in a timely manner to facilitate post-mortems before they decompose.

"This will enable us to determine the exact cause of death, whether it is natural or not. We need more research on marine life in India to establish if our activities are harming their ecosystem. Without a census, we don't know if the dolphin population has increased or decreased," he said.

"Fishermen usually don't consume or sell dolphins, so the ones that end up in their nets are returned to the water, even if injured. We need is a helpline so vets can treat injured marine animals," said Sarang Kulkarni, an independent marine biologist.

According to marine biologist Nitin Walmiki, slash marks on the carcass could mean the dolphin was hit by a ship's propeller. "Unless a detailed autopsy is done before the carcass decomposes, we cannot establish this," he said, adding the humpback dolphin is protected under Schedule 2 of the Wildlife Protection Act and killing it could mean jail time and fines as this comes under the Act's 'hunting' section.

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