

Leatherback Turtle Mitigation Outreach Component

Final report by Julie Huntington of Tangly Whales Inc. November 2018

Whale Release and Strandings has been disentangling leatherback turtles and whales in Newfoundland waters since 2001. In order to reduce harm to leatherback turtles we developed harm mitigation practical educational material to present to Newfoundland and Labrador harvesters from 2J3KL through an FFAW-Unifor and WWF funded program. During November 2018, ten presentations were made to harvesters engaging and informing them about the life history of Leatherback Turtles (LBTs) in Newfoundland and Labrador waters and training them to disentangle LBTs to reduce the threat of leatherback turtle mortality in fishing gear. Over 280 harvesters and seven FFAW staff attended these meetings.

These FFAW meetings were held in the following locations for all harvesters. Staff representatives and FFAW science staff were in attendance to discuss oil and gas (Robyn Lee), capelin and mackerel (Natalya Dawe), post-season crab survey (Miranda McGrath) and Leatherback Turtle Disentanglement methods (Julie Huntington, Whale Release and Strandings Program).

Meeting Locations

Tuesday, Nov. 20 with John Boland

St. John's – 9:30 (Comfort Inn by the Airport)
Carbonear – 2:00 (Fong's)

Wednesday, Nov. 21 with John Boland

Bonavista – 9:00 (SUF Hall)
Eastport – 3:00 (SUF Hall)
New-Wes-Valley – 7:30 (Harbour Authority)

Thursday, Nov. 22 with Roland Hedderson

Musgrave Harbour – 10:00 (Firehall)
Fogo Island – 7:00 (UC Hall)

Friday, Nov. 23 with Roland Hedderson

Virgin Arm – 10:00 (Lion's Club)

Monday, Nov. 26 with Monty Way

Baie Verte -10:00 (Baie Vista Inn)
Robert's Arm - 2:30 (Community Center)

The outreach presentations included the following materials: LBT skull and plasticized throat, life size shadow outline of a turtle, video of an entangled turtle, line cutters (at right) and extendable poles for use and care demonstration. An LBT information sheet is being developed to increase harvester's knowledge on LBTs, information on report sightings and the importance of recording sightings/incidences in harvester SARA logbooks. Whale Release and Strandings has a booklet that dedicates two pages to this topic. It was available for harvesters at the meetings and is available on line at <http://newfoundland-labradorwhales.net/>. The attached poster is available on request to whales@nl.rogers.com.

The skull is used to show the LBT has no teeth and that the animal does not try to bite you. The plasticized throat is used to show how a turtle can ingest jelly fish and that if it does ingest plastic bait bags used in the crab fishery, (or other plastic bags), that look similar to jelly fish in the water, that the turtle cannot spit bags out once they start to swallow them because the bags are caught on the spines (papillae) that point in a stomach-wise direction. This turtle mortality can be mitigated if harvesters bring their waste ashore.



Line cutters for cutting ropes on entangled turtles.



The life size shadow is used to gain an understanding of the size of the LBTs and where on their bodies the turtles generally get entangled and why. This is for entangled turtle response training. Their side fins are large and are constantly in motion so that when the turtle comes in contact with haul up lines on fishing gear the rope may wrap around the side fins and then possibly the neck entangling the turtle.

The harvesters are told that if they catch a LBT in their fishing gear, it will not try to hurt them, even though it keeps moving its side fins. They are considered benign and appear skittish. Despite the turtle's size and strength, harvesters can pull the animal over to the side of their boat, and without bringing the LBT out of the water, they will probably be able to untwist the ropes easily and release it quickly with little if any gear damage. The safe use and care of specifically designed line cutters for more complicated disentanglements were shown to the harvesters. These cutters are modified technologies to minimize harm to the turtle during response incidents.

Harvesters were asked to report if they see LBTs or if they release one from their fishing gear. Call 1-888-895-3003 to report a sighting or to get help with a disentanglement. Scientists are interested in these sightings. Information reported should include the following: latitude and longitude, date, time and vessel number. Pictures and videos are always helpful. By being eyes and ears on the water for LBTs harvesters can help us all to learn more about the leatherback turtle's unique life history and help to prevent further declines in their population.

WANTED

You see this turtle-
We want to know!
call 1-888-895-3003

The Leatherback Turtle in Newfoundland & Labrador

THE LEATHERBACK SEA TURTLE is a large oceanic reptile that can weigh 900 kg. Most turtles in Newfoundland and Labrador waters are smaller ranging from 230 to 370kg. They have no hard shell like other turtles instead their backs have a tough rigid covering. They can swim quite rapidly using with their large front flippers. Life expectancy is not known, but the age at first breeding is believed to be between 10 to 15 years.

LATE SUMMER VISITORS
The leatherback sea turtle is the only species of marine turtle that is commonly seen in Newfoundland and Labrador and it is considered to be the most widely-travelled of all marine turtles. They have been seen on all coasts of Newfoundland and can be found as far in Labrador. Leatherbacks are usually found in our waters in late summer when the ocean is warmest, although some have been spotted in the mid-coast waters of early spring. Scientists believe that they migrate to here in the warm waters of the Gulf Stream. The only report of a leatherback found in Newfoundland came from a breeding beach in French Cove.

WHERE DO THEY LAY THEIR EGGS?
Leatherbacks are able to travel in the open water with ease of the North Atlantic, from April to November females return to the tropics and lay their eggs in the warm sands of tropical beaches. The leatherbacks use beach to lay their eggs which must quickly reach their way to the ocean to avoid predators such as crabs, birds and humans.

FOOD SOURCE IS JELLYFISH
Leatherbacks have to reach, and their mouth and throat continue to work with body waves which aid in swallowing the soft, slippery jellyfish. It's difficult for leatherbacks to digest it and they die because they have been following currents with jellyfish. Though they often appear to be eating an effective, sometimes and first, leatherbacks are not ingesting fast enough to eat, but are ingesting an amount that has reached the gut. Unfortunately, turtles get increasingly ill as they eat with their plastic bags, which they have mistaken for jellyfish, changing their path.

IF YOU SEE ONE...
If you see a leatherback turtle or witness one from your fishing gear please report it. Scientists are only interested in their sex and their body length approximately. You can report a sighting to the appropriate authority through the toll-free number 1-888-895-3003. With the information that you provide latitude and longitude, date, time and vessel number we can learn more about the leatherback's unique life history and prevent further declines in their population. Call 1-888-895-3003 to report a sighting, and you will be sent a leatherback Turtle Fact Sheet.

IF YOU CATCH ONE...
If you catch a leatherback turtle from your fishing gear, do not try to hurt it. Despite their size and strength, leatherbacks are quite gentle and almost always harmless. Don't try to kill it and attempt to stay away from you and your boat. Usually the turtle is caught by ropes around its flippers, and by getting the turtle away from your boat you will probably be able to prevent the ropes from cutting and release it quickly without much additional gear damage. Do not attempt to see the turtle or what is in its stomach, as this may harm it.

HOW CAN YOU HELP?

- Call us when you see turtles, and let us know the date, time and where you saw them and the number of the turtles you saw.
- Leatherbacks are sensitive to pollution and avoid areas with high concentrations of pollutants.
- Leatherbacks are sensitive to plastic bags and avoid areas with high concentrations of plastic bags.
- Look for eggs on the edges of your boat and avoid stepping on them.
- Leatherbacks are sensitive to plastic bags and avoid areas with high concentrations of plastic bags.

IF YOU CANNOT RELEASE THE ANIMAL WE CAN HELP YOU IF YOU CALL THE NUMBER BELOW, DAY OR NIGHT. PLEASE ALSO CALL THIS NUMBER IF YOU RELEASE A TURTLE.

1-888-895-3003

Whale Release & Stranding | OCEANUS | CFAWS

WHALE AND TURTLE NOTICE

1-888-895-3003

If you have a **WHALE** or **TURTLE** or basking shark (live or dead) caught in your fishing gear, call this toll-free number and we will respond with a trained team. If you see any whales, turtles or dolphins (live or dead) on a beach, please call. Should you see any leatherback sea turtles please call.

Fisheries and Oceans Canada
Pêches et Océans Canada
Whale Release & Strandings Newfoundland & Labrador