Humpback Whale, Trapped for 29 Days in Fishermen’s Nets, Rescued off Oman.

Reports that another humpback whale had become entangled in a fisherman’s net led Oman’s recently established Whale and Dolphin Rescue Team to make a six and a half hour journey, in four-wheel-drive vehicles, from Muscat to Khaluf, situated on one of the Sultanate’s more remote stretches of coastline. Their journey was not in vain for they successfully released yet another young humpback whale that was trapped in similar circumstances to the whale whose rescue was briefly described in the previous issue of Arabian Wildlife magazine. On this occasion, however, the team had a more difficult challenge and needed to draw on all their available skills and knowledge in an operation that was fraught with danger and excitement.

Led by Mohammed Barwani of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (and Oman’s International Whaling Commission representative since 1981), and by cetacean expert Robert Baldwin, the convoy of five vehicles included officials from the Ministry of Municipalities & Environment (MRME) and volunteer divers from Sultan Qaboos University; Muscat Divers; Airworks and the Royal Flight. The rough road to Khaluf on the southern shores of the Gubbat Flashish, 60 km south-west of Masira island, led the team to a stunning white sand beach strewn with evidence of intense fishing activity, including the remains of countless fishes, three dolphins and two turtles. It was here that Saleh Ali, Director of the Mahoot office of MRME, and concerned fishermen, directed the team to the whale, just 500 m offshore, where it had apparently been struggling in a large gill net for an incredible 29 days.

Frightened whale poses threat to divers

An advance team of three snorkellers entered the murky water to try to establish just how badly entangled the eight metre long whale had become. Attempting to calm the distraught and badly sunburned animal, they soon realized that in exceptionally poor visibility, and with the whale frustrated and frightened, the task ahead was going to be dangerous, difficult and physically challenging.

The fishing net was deeply embedded in the long cuts that it had gouged in the whale’s head and extending back along the body, engulflng both flippers. In addition, a bundle of ropes, nets and fishing floats were wrapped tightly around the body and hooked over the dorsal fin. Only the tail remained ‘free’ (if you could use that word to describe its ability to thrash the water in a desperate struggle to break out of its imprisonment). The snorkelling team quickly tied a rope around the fishing floats and secured the other end to a support boat, in order to keep track of the submerged whale. Two divers then slipped in and descended along the rope while others began to kit up and prepare for the dive ahead. Suddenly a divers boot and fin appeared at the surface amid a commotion of bubbles and white water. Anxiety filled the observers in the boat. Then, to their relief, the divers reappeared, unharmed but looking shocked and shaken by their alarming experience. The whale had evidently turned underwater and the divers had inadvertently swum directly towards the tail, six feet across and frighteningly powerful. One was struck in the chest, forcing him upwards through the water and knocking his air-supply regulator from his mouth. It seemed that the only safe (or relatively safe) way to approach the whale was to wait for it to surface.

With knives and scissors ready, divers again entered the water. The whale surfaced nearby and the divers quickly grabbed hold of the net around the head and began to cut. Stroking the whale’s pleated throat in an attempt to calm the nervous animal seemed to have little effect. Surrounded by divers, the whale was clearly distressed, blowing while still underwater, bucking its head and thrashing its tail. Some of the divers managed to hang on as the whale dived, and continued to cut the net. The whale reappeared briefly on the surface, divers clinging to the net on both sides, then dived once more, dragging the divers with it beneath the surface.

Blood spurted from the whale’s nose as the net was cut and pulled from inch-deep wounds inflicted over the past month as the
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The whale had struggled to free itself. The net then slipped back, freeing the head. One diver managed to cut the ropes from the huge flippers and sensing freedom the whale lunged forward, dragging the boat sideways across the surface, threatening to capsize it. A diver's foot became entangled in one of many ropes trailing from the whale and he was dragged backwards through the water, tumbling in the turbulence created by the beating tail flukes, whilst he cut at the rope, trying to free himself.

**WHALE SENSE**

An hour and a half after the first diver had entered the water, the whale appeared to be free. However, to the rescuers great surprise, it made no apparent attempt to leave. At that point they realized that the net must have become entangled around the tail. Exhausted by their sustained efforts to free the whale, and fearing to repeat the mistakes of the first two swimmers who were lucky to have escaped serious injury, the divers silently surveyed the scene, searching for an answer: from the whale itself, or from their colleagues. Each one of them was acutely aware of the danger of approaching the tangled but incredibly powerful tail flukes. Without warning the whale surfaced among them and a single diver took hold of the whale's dorsal fin and began to cautiously make his way towards the tail. What happened next will remain a secret of shared understanding between that diver and the whale itself. Having displayed little recognition, up to that point, of the friendly intentions of its human visitors, the whale's disposition now changed to one which those watching would later describe as understanding and cooperation. The whale allowed the diver to effortlessly slip the ropes from either side of the flukes and with a gentle beat of the huge and fearsome tail, it was finally free. Only the surface eddies marked its underwater path as it headed away from the fishing boats towards the relative safety of open water.

**FREEDOM DANCE**

Elated yet exhausted, the rescuers now watched as the 15-20 tonne whale launched itself from the water in a series of consecutive breaches that were to continue for an hour, during which time it breached an amazing 150 times! Why, after an agonizing and exhausting 29 days, wrapped in the choking grasp of a near-deadly net, did the exhausted creature show such energy and apparent exuberance one can only guess. Perhaps the physical imprint of the net itself had left the whale with an uncomfortable feeling that parts of it were still attached to its body. Perhaps parasites had accumulated whilst the whale had remained trapped and stationary for so long and this was an attempt to rid itself of them. Perhaps the whale was attempting to communicate with other whales out at sea. Or was it trying to say something to its saviours? Whatever the reason, its joyous freedom dance conveyed a sense of great satisfaction and happiness to the divers as the boat headed back to shore.

**NET COST OF WHALE RESCUE**

The rescue at Khaluf marks the sixth rescue attempt of its kind on humpback whales in Oman. Many whales and dolphins suffer the same problem, but the humpback whale (which may be in danger of extinction), and other species that feed close to shore, come into contact with fishing nets more frequently. And behind the scenes there lies a political dilemma as intricate and problematic as the nets themselves.

Fishing is a major industry in the Sultanate of Oman and the concerns of fishermen are justifiably given very serious consideration at government level. Establishing a suitable working balance between the traditional rights of fishermen, and the sustenance of a rich and varied marine environment upon which their livelihoods depend, is the challenge and never ending task that faces concerned officials, fisheries scientists and conservationists. By default, fish stocks themselves cannot thrive under conditions of unsustainable harvest and victims of accidental 'by-catches', such as whales with low population numbers, also suffer.

The Oman Whale and Dolphin Rescue Team intend to devise measures that will prevent the capture of whales, dolphins and other forms of marine life that do not form the target of fishermen's efforts. This requires careful planning, political negotiation and financing. Although whales have been successfully rescued, albeit with difficulty in some instances, the team cannot escape payment to the fishermen of considerable sums of money for the loss of, or damage to, their fishing nets. The cost of a single whale rescue can thus decimate sponsorship funding upon which the team depends for all its work. However, rescuing whales also has its benefits, not only to the whales themselves, but also to the successful team and to volunteer divers who are afforded the privilege and excitement of a dive they will never forget.

The Whale and Dolphin Rescue Team rely entirely upon local sponsorship from private companies, such as Shell Marketing, Taylor-Woodrow-Towell, Truckman, National Training Institute, Swissair, Sabco LLC, Muscat Intercontinental Hotel, Arabian Mapping Company, Arabian Sea Expedition, Family Bookshop and Douglas OHI. The team's aims include extensive research to discover more about Oman's whales and dolphins; education about their ceteceans and their conservation, establishment of programmes to reduce, and hopefully prevent, accidental net captures, and finally to encourage reporting of any sightings of whales and dolphins. Sightings can be reported to the Oman Natural History Museum, PO Box 668, Muscat 113; Tel (968) 605400; Fax (968) 602735, where further information is also available.

Robert Baldwin and Mohammed Barwani