

Whale Freed From 4,000 Pounds of Fishing Gear

By Katie Kausch | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com Sept. 9, 2020



Flotation is added to entangled gear while staff from Center from Coastal Studies (CCS) in Provincetown, MA assess the situation and next steps. Photo by AMSEAS.

An injured whale was rescued from the waters between New York and New Jersey after a multi-day effort including agencies from three different states, including a specialty team that flew from Provincetown, Massachusetts to New York City and a specialized team from Monmouth University.

The whale was reported to the Coast Guard after being spotted by a recreational boat off the coast of the Rockaways in New York City, across from Sandy Hook, in late July. An investigation showed it was entangled by several buoys and thousands of pounds of steel fishing gear.

“Sometimes the whale could get themselves out of whatever they’re tangled in. Sometimes it just takes very minimal amount of (work), a small inflatable boat with some specialized knives and cutting tools to cut it free. But this was a big was a serious, entanglement to get the whale free from,” Jim Nickles, a marine scientist with Monmouth University’s Urban Coast Institute who assisted in the operation, told NJ Advance Media.

The rescue began on Monday, July 27, when rescue workers from New York State Department of Environmental Conservation and the Atlantic Marine Conservation Society went out to check on the condition of the whale.

Although they couldn’t yet see what, something was anchoring the whale to the sea floor, leaving him unable to swim and barely able to hold his head above the surface to breathe. The whale was in immediate danger of being hit by a boat or being attacked by a predator.

Both teams went back out to the whale the following day, taking images that showed exactly what was holding the whale down: over 4,000 pounds of fishing equipment.

The next morning, a team from the Center for Coastal Studies specializing in disentangling whales flew from Massachusetts to New York on a donated flight, ready to help free the whale.



USACE Drift Collection Vessel Hayward lifts gear that is entangled around the whale's tail stock out of the water so CCS staff can cut the gear free.
Photo by NEFSC

The team was able to cut away multiple buoys and cut through some of the gear near the whale's tail, but the whale was still stuck in the water by the time it was too dark for rescue efforts to continue safely.

"That was among the more challenging whale disentanglement cases we have dealt with. That whale was fighting to live. All the folks we were working with on the water the last two days were fighting to help it", Scott Landry, the director of Marine Animal Entanglement Response at the Center for Coastal Studies in Massachusetts said shortly after the whale was freed in July.

On the fourth day, a research vessel from Monmouth University's Urban Coast Institute and a researcher from NOAA Northeast Fisheries Science Center's Sandy Hook lab were called out, as well as a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Drift Collection Vessel.

Both boats used heavy-duty gear to attack the fishing supplies, and by 4 p.m. the final cut was made to free the whale, four days after he was first spotted.

Although whale entanglements are not unusual, a rescue effort of this magnitude is, experts said.

"Using a hacksaw rescuers were able to cut through the steel cable holding the whale and the whale was able to swim free," Nickles said.

Nickles said the Urban Coast Institute usually uses this particular boat for research efforts and it's been several years since the institute assisted in a whale disentanglement. This particular story had a happy ending. The whale was spotted a week after its rescue off the coast of Long Island and appeared to be doing just fine.

"I'm sure he'll have a scar and a bad remembrance of coming off the New York Coast, but short of that, I think he's okay," Nickles said.

Nickles stressed that the rescue effort would not have been possible if the boater did not call in the whale sighting to the Coast Guard. Callers will be asked questions about what they see, and to send a photograph if possible, so rescue efforts can begin.

Injured whales spotted in the ocean anywhere between Maine and Virginia can be reported to NOAA at 866-755-6622.

<https://www.nj.com/hudson/2020/09/whale-freed-from-4000-pounds-of-fishing-gear-by-team-including-nj-university.html>