Ships Arriving at Ports With Extra Cargo: Dead Whales

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SEATTLE -- Over a period of about eight weeks, three ships pulled into Northwest ports with a fin whale draped over their bulbous underwater bows.

The first dead fin whale -- the mammal is the world's second-largest creature -- arrived Aug. 9 at the Port of Seattle on the bow of the container ship Tokyo Express. The second came into Portland, Ore., on the automobile transport vessel Ruby Ray on Sept. 2. The third reached a Cherry Point, Wash., refinery on the bow of an oil tanker Oct. 2.

It's happened before, but not in such quick succession.

"To have three come in so close together is something we've not seen before," said Brent Norberg, marine-mammal coordinator for the National Marine Fisheries Service here.

It's not clear why, though scientists speculate that the whales may have changed feeding patterns -- moving into traffic lanes in search of prey. It appears "the food they're grazing on happens to be on a freeway," he said.

And there may well be more such cases.

"We don't have any feel at all for what the frequency is of animals that get struck at sea and dislodged at sea," he said.

Ship-whale collisions and other encounters -- net entanglements and propeller hits -- have been an increasing factor in whale deaths off the nation's coasts for some years now, raising concerns among whale biologists. Ships are bigger and faster while populations of the now protected whales are increasing.

In the recent cases, tests indicate that two of the whales were alive when they were hit. Damage to the Portland carcass suggests it was already dead.

The carcasses, which ranged from 35 feet to 60 feet long, apparently were tucked up against the vessels by the bulbous bows, which protrude into the ship's path just under the waterline. The odd-shaped projections on cargo ships' noses have greatly increased fuel efficiency through "wave-making resistance reduction technology" developed in the early 1960s.

"I've never seen a container ship without one," Port of Seattle spokesman Mick

Schultz said.

A bulbous bow would prevent a struck animal from simply rolling off to the side, Norberg said.

There is no research on whether bulbous-bow technology could be a factor in whale deaths, Norberg said. The percentage of bulbous-bow ships involved in collisions with whales is not known.

Ships' crews "are as surprised as anyone when they pull in and the animal is there," he said. The vessels weigh in at tens of thousands of tons: "That's a massive object moving through the water," and striking a whale would be "kind of like hitting a noodle with your car."

The remains of the two whales that probably were alive when struck were quite fresh when they reached port, Norberg said, which suggests the strikes occurred as the vessels neared their journeys' end.

That reduces the chance a whale strike would be noticed, he said. When ships near port -- after a five-day straight-shot voyage from Asia, for example -- they are busy taking on pilots to navigate inland waters, slowing down to enter the Strait of Juan de Fuca and making routine changes in operational strategy.

Also, "crew size is going down as vessel speed and size are going up," noted activist Fred Felleman of Ocean Advocates. "And even if somebody did see a whale, it's not like a big ship can turn on a dime."

Unlike toothed whales, baleens do not echo-locate -- a method of detecting objects and food by creating a series of clicks and interpreting the reflected sound. Even so, scientists believe they have very sensitive hearing. And today's bigger, faster ships generate "significant amounts of noise," said whale expert John Calambokidis of Cascadia Research in Olympia, Wash.

Still, with few natural enemies, whales may not consider an approaching vessel a threat.