

Ocean 'robot' to help identify toxic algae off Washington state

Toxic bloom closed shellfish fisheries

By PHUONG LE
Associated Press

SEATTLE — After a massive toxic algae bloom closed lucrative shellfish fisheries off the West Coast last year, scientists are turning to a new tool that could provide an early warning of future problems.

Scientists at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the University of Washington last week deployed the so-called ocean robot about 50 feet into waters off the coast of La Push, Washington, near a known hotspot for toxic algae blooms.

The tool, dubbed "a laboratory in a can," will remain in the water until mid-July, providing real-time measurements about the concentrations of six species of microscopic algae and toxins they produce, including domoic acid.

The instrument is equipped with sensors and cellular modems that will allow it to take water samples and send that information to shore three times a week for the next several weeks. Scientists plan to deploy it again in the fall, another critical time for harmful algae blooms.

Last year, dangerous levels of domoic acid were found in shellfish and prompted California, Washington state and Oregon to delay its coastal Dungeness crabbing season. Washington state and Oregon also canceled

razor clam digs for much of the year.

The domoic acid was produced by microscopic algae that flourished during the summer amid unusually warm Pacific Ocean temperatures. The massive algae bloom produced some of the highest concentrations of domoic acid observed along some parts of the West Coast.

Shellfish managers, public health officials, coastal tribes and others will be able to access the algae data and get advanced warning of toxic algae blooms off the Washington coast before they move to the coastline and contaminate shellfish.

Domoic acid is harmful to people, fish and marine life. It accumulates in shellfish, anchovies and other small fish that eat the algae.



Stephanie Moore, NOAA via AP
An automated laboratory that will analyze seawater for algae species and toxins is lowered by researchers into the Pacific about 13 miles from La Push, Wash., in May.

Dead whale found on bow of cruise ship

By DAN JOLING
Associated Press

ANCHORAGE — A veterinary pathologist worked to determine what killed a juvenile fin whale discovered on the bow of a cruise ship entering an Alaska port.

The cause of death was not immediately apparent for the endangered whale spotted just after 5 a.m. Sunday on the bulbous bow of the Zaandam, a Holland America Line cruise ship, as it prepared to dock in Seward.

The carcass was towed to a beach near Seward, a spokeswoman for the fisheries section of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Julie Speegle, said Monday.

The veterinary pathologist, Kathy Burek, began a necropsy Sunday night and planned to continue Monday, with armed NOAA Fisheries law enforcement officers standing guard against bears, Speegle said.

The bulbous bow is an extension of the main bow. It rides under the water and is designed to avoid wave-making.

A whale on the bulbous bow may not be the result of a ship strike, Speegle said. It could have been already dead in the water and caught by the device.

"That's something, hopefully, the necropsy will determine," Speegle said.

The whale was not seen on the bulbous bow a half-hour earlier, Sally Andrews, a spokeswoman for Holland America, said in an email. An officer had been preparing the ship for arrival just after 4:30 a.m. and did not see a whale, she said.

The company is saddened by the event, Andrews said. Holland America has a comprehensive program to avoid striking whales and was not aware of whales in the area.

"Our ships have clear guidelines on how to operate if whales are sighted nearby, which include altering course and reducing speed as required," she said.

The Zaandam is scheduled to stop in Astoria in late September. Fin whales feed on schooling fish and invertebrates by gulping large swarms of them while swimming on their sides, according to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

Fin whales were decimated by commercial whalers in the 1800s and early 1900s. The average adult male is 70 feet long and 45 tons. Adult females average 73 feet and 45 tons.

The dead male juvenile was considerably smaller, but Speegle did not have its dimensions.

Last year 10 fin whales were among 18 endangered whales whose carcasses were found floating near Alaska's Kodiak Island between Memorial Day Weekend and early July. The others were humpback whales.

Scientists speculated that the animals might have eaten something toxic in warmer-than-average water. That investigation was hampered because some of the whales had significantly decomposed before they were found.

The dead whale found on the cruise ship will be tested, Speegle said. "We are taking samples for harmful algal blooms," she said.



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