PI 141

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PI 141 was a 242 cm long, 139.5 kg male melon-headed whale, *Peponocephala electra*, who stranded alive 13 miles north of access road #6, Cameron County, Texas, June 13, 2000. He died shortly after discovery. He was frozen and transported to the Galveston laboratory, where he was necropsied on July 17, 2000.

The animal was in reasonably good body condition, with several large shark bites, one of which had removed a large mass of blubber and underlying muscle from the ventral surface. These bites were about 10 inches across, suggesting a large shark, and were accompanied by a number of slashes made by shark teeth. The characteristic tooth marks were relatively widely spaced, suggesting a shark species with few, but large teeth in a single row. In addition to these marks were old, well-healed rakes and a number of healed cookie cutter shark bite scars.

The blubber was normally thick. Although the animal had been frozen, necropsy was done in our usual fashion. All the organs were normal in appearance. The gonads were small, suggesting a young animal. The stomach contained a number of squid beaks, but no recent food materials. There were several encysted parasites, typical of *Phyllobothrium*, in the genital area. Histologic examination was limited to an elevated mass on the chin area, and to the brain. In the absence of obvious organ disease, we tend to think of encephalitis or meningitis as a possible association with stranding. Neither was found. We attributed death to shark bites, blood loss and stranding.

We are very fortunate to have the observation that the animal was alive at stranding. This makes this an example of shark predation, rather than shark scavenging of a dead animal. All the shark lesions were very recent, and without the observer's contribution, we could not have told whether the bites occurred before or after death. There are two unresolved questions in this case. The first is, what made this animal vulnerable to shark attack? I think it happened in relatively shallow water, or the whale likely could not have made it to the beach. He may have been sick, or otherwise exhibited behavior exhibiting vulnerability. That is my bias, since he appears not to have fed recently. We can't diagnose subtle disease in frozen animals.

The second question is, what is going on with the *Peponocephala*? These are deep water animals, and for the first eight or so years of my work with the Network, there were no *Peponocephala* strandings. Then we have had six of this species within less than two years, making them second only to *Tursiops* in number among our Code 2 animals. There is no distinguishing pattern of disease among them. I understand that there have been sightings of *Peponocephala* inshore of their usual range, which implies that there is some shift going on, and that we are not seeing some wildly aberrant animals on the beach. I suspect that something is influencing the abundance and distribution of food species, a phenomenon that has been noticed in both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. It will be interesting to see if this change of pattern persists.