

This young whale died with 88 pounds of plastic in its stomach

The animal in the Philippines likely starved because its stomach was full of plastic, not food.

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Researchers pulled nearly 90 pounds of plastic waste out of the stomach of a young cuvier beaked whale that died in the Davao Gulf of the Philippines on Saturday, March 16. The whale starved to death because of the plastic in its belly. PHOTOGRAPH BY MARY GAY BLATCHLEY, D'BONE COLLECTOR MUSEUM

Workers at a natural history museum in Davao City, the Philippines, got a call from the local marine unit: A very thin-looking whale in the Davao Gulf was puking blood, sinking badly as it swam, and was very likely going to die shortly. They should come pick up its body.

Darrell Blatchley, a sea mammal expert in Davao City, brought the whale back to the lab to open it up for a “necropsy”. A necropsy is a surgery used to discover how something died. Blatchley found something shocking: more than 88 pounds (40 kilos) of plastic waste jammed into its belly.

“Plastic was just bursting out of its stomach,” he said. “We pulled out the first bag, then the second. By the time we hit 16 rice sacks—on top of the plastic bags, and the snack bags, and big tangles of nylon ropes, you’re like—seriously?”

His son, who was watching the surgery, said “Dad, how did it even live this long?”

The plastic trash was so tightly jammed into the dead whale's stomach that it felt as “hard and compacted as a baseball,” he said, only many times bigger—more like two basketballs of trash, about eight percent of the whale's total weight. Some of the plastic had been in the whale’s stomach so long it had started to harden.

The young male about 15 feet long and weighing 1,100 pounds (4.5 meters long and 500 kilograms), likely died of lack of food and water brought on by the plastic stuffing its belly. Whales take up water from the food they eat, and there was no sign that any food had made it into the whale’s body for many days. Its body was destroying itself from the inside: Its stomach acid, unable to break down the plastic trash, had made holes through its own stomach lining instead.

This whale was far from alone

As the plastic pollution problem grows, more and more dolphins, whales, birds, and fish are found dead with their stomachs full of plastic. In 2015, scientists think that around 90 percent of all seabirds have eaten plastic; The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (“UNESCO”) estimates that 100,000 sea mammals die because of plastic pollution each year.

The cause of death changes. Sometimes, like in this case, plastic blocks food and starves the animal. Other times, sharp plastic edges poke holes in their organs. In most cases, the amount of plastic animals eat isn’t enough to kill them, says Matthew Savoca, a whale expert who also studies plastic pollution. But the negative effects can grow every day, even if only a little bit of plastic ends up in their bellies. “If you’re eating 10 percent less calories than your neighbor, day after day, that adds up,” says Savoca.

“Basically, wherever we’re looking for plastics, we’re finding them,” says Savoca, “Now, we’re seeing that even in places humans never even have been close to, we find our trash. And not just that, but animals eating our trash.”

The waters around the Philippines are dangerous for many sea animals. The country has some of the most plastic pollution in the world, and many of its waterways are thick with trash. There are many laws in place against pollution, but consequences are light, and managing the waste across the country's more than 7,000 islands is challenging. Plastic-wrapped items are for sale nearly everywhere as well.

Blatchley has recovered 61 whales that died in the nearby Davao Gulf. Of those, he thinks that plastics were the cause of death for about 45 of them. The problem is made worse, he says, by heavy fishing in the region, which has lowered the amount of food available for the whales to eat, making them even more likely to try to eat plastics floating nearby.

"It's just tragic that this is becoming the norm, to expect that these whales will die because of plastic rather than from natural causes," he says. "We're losing them faster than they can evolve to learn not to eat the plastic."