

# License Plate Funds to the Rescue

## Oregon Marine Mammal Stranding Network

Jim Rice, Stranding Program Manager

Thanks to the generosity of Oregonians who have purchased license plates bearing the beautiful depiction of a gray whale mother and calf, the Oregon Marine Mammal Stranding Network (OMMSN) got a big boost of support this past summer. For the first time ever, I was fortunate to have a dedicated assistant to help me with the daily operation of our marine mammal stranding response unit.

The OMMSN provides a first line of detection for ocean health concerns, through the continuous surveillance of emerging, infectious, and zoonotic diseases in marine mammals in areas frequented by the general public. We track human causes of marine mammal morbidity and mortality, such as fishery takes, ship strikes, shootings, and entanglement in marine debris. Our efforts also offer a humanitarian response to animals in distress, and by mitigating interactions between marine mammals and humans, help to minimize risks to public health and safety.

Since October 2005, I have managed the daily operation of OMMSN virtually single-handedly. This work entails monitoring a statewide stranding hotline seven days per week (over 1,000 calls annually), and responding to all manner of stranding-related issues as they occur. During the summer months, this typically involves answering a near-steady stream of calls, often from desperate tourists

alarmed by the appearance of a live mammal on the beach, such as a newborn harbor seal pup or an elephant seal enduring its annual “catastrophic molting” process. Such calls typically lead us to dispatch volunteers to help keep these resting animals from being negatively impacted by curious people (and their dogs).



Above: Charles Nye samples the remains of a gray whale at Cape Arago.

The work also involves venturing out to far-flung locales along the coast to investigate the causes of mortalities and sometimes even to provide euthanasia to severely sick or injured animals.

The temporary employment of a part-time graduate assistant during the busiest time of the year allowed me to manage a high volume of stranding events more effectively, while affording an opportunity to tend to some long-overdue projects in the necropsy lab. I’m confident that it also

provided an enriching learning experience for a highly motivated and engaged graduate student.

Charles Nye, a PhD student in MMI’s Cetacean Conservation and Genomics Laboratory, served as my Graduate Research Assistant between mid-June and mid-September. Charles helped me enormously in many facets of my day-to-day routine, by receiving, logging, and investigating hundreds of reports of marine mammals ashore and engaging in numerous beach responses, including the examination of a dead gray whale at Cape Arago and the rescue and transport of an entangled Guadalupe fur seal (*Arctocephalus townsendi*) at Gleneden Beach.

Charles eagerly assisted me with numerous necropsies (and took the initiative to conduct several necropsies on his own while I was away on leave) and helped me manage our vast inventory of archived frozen tissues. Using his skills in the genetics lab, Charles sought to determine the ecotype of a dead floating killer whale, among other things.

The support that Charles provided this summer was a welcome enhancement to OMMSN, and it was made possible by the Marine Mammal Institute’s Oregon Gray Whale License Plate Fund Program. I look forward to drawing upon further such opportunities for student involvement in months and years to come. **MMI**