Freeing the mighty

with Doug Coughran AM

Parks and Wildlife marine senior wildlife officer Doug Coughran takes us behind the scenes to experience the challenge, the exhaustion and, ultimately, the elation of freeing an entangled whale.

It was a Tuesday when professional octopus fisher Peter Stanich called me. He'd found a small humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeanglia*) that he thought was a calf badly entangled in fishing gear. There was another whale nearby – presumably the calf's mother. The larger whale didn't appear to be entangled but the smaller whale was trapped, with its tail caught somewhere amid the 200m longline and 13 octopus pots.

We told Peter that we would mobilise a response team and asked him to stand by. So we brought together five Parks and Wildlife staff and four staff from the Department of Fisheries. The team travelled for two hours to reach the whale, which had already dragged the fishing gear about 3.5km south-west of where it was first reported.

Previous page
Main The whale rescue team on board the zodiac as a male suitor launches itself into the air.
Photo – Anna Phillips/Fisheries WA
Inset The magnificent and potentially menacing tail of a humpback whale.
Photo – Adam Geschwind/Lochman Transparencies

Left Parks and Wildlife's marine senior wildlife officer Doug Coughran.
Photo – Parks and Wildlife

"To rid the whale of its rope you need to be extremely careful which ropes you cut – cut the wrong one and the whale may travel off carrying all the gear and eventually die."

THE RESCUE

On arrival the wind was picking up to about 15 to 20 knots from the south-west and there was a swell of 1.5 to 2m. We launched the department's 5m zodiac off the deck of the Fisheries patrol vessel *Hamelin* into the waves and began the initial assessment – important in ensuring the safety of officers and necessary in deciding whether any operation is undertaken.

We then approached the trapped whale in the zodiac and attached a control line to the entangled rope, in effect attaching a safety line to the whale. A control line helped us to move towards and away from the whale without using the motor as the sound of the motor tends to agitate the whale. But this was easier said than done as the whale was heavily weighted at the tail and it was straining to get its head to the surface to clear its blowholes to breathe.

We soon realised that the humpback was not a calf but a 14m breeding female, who had three suitors close by. One whale in particular was quite close to the entangled whale. During a disentanglement we never leave the boat but we often have to stick our heads into the water to see what's happening below the surface. Needless to say, we needed to keep a close eye on him, plus the other two further out to monitor their behaviour and read their body language and to be ready for a quick getaway if they became agressive.

Below left Aided by the safety line the team manoeuvres the zodiac to make a decisive cut of the entangled rope.
Photo – Leighton De Barros/Sea Dog TV International Pty Ltd

Below A humpback's chin plate close up, a formidable weapon for fighting and defence.
Photo – Doug Coughran/Parks and Wildlife

TROUBLE

To rid the whale of its rope you need to be extremely careful which ropes you cut – cut the wrong one and the whale may travel off carrying all the gear and eventually die. Cut another and you might lose the control line. We soon realised this whale was so tightly entangled that the ropes had cut into its flesh. Freeing it was proving no easy task. Added to this was the wind, swell, seasickness and the physical fatigue.

Because the whale continually dived away trying to escape us, we had to attach five 1.5m-wide bouys to the control line. This helped to stop the whale diving and kept it near the surface.

Next we used a small-scale scuba tank called a pony bottle to enable us to keep our heads underwater for longer periods, without leaving the boat, and to better study the entanglement to work out the best cutting strategy. It doesn't take too long of ducking your head under the waves holding your breath or with a snorkel to tire you out completely, so the pony bottle really helped.

Finally, using a specially modified blade, we managed to free the whale of its binds – three-and-a-half hours after starting our work. Exhausted but elated, we rated it as one of our most trying whale disentanglements yet.

Top A humpback whale makes a close pass of the whale rescue team.

Above A humpback's intimidating continuous tail slapping of the surface of the water.
Photos – Doug Coughran/Parks and Wildlife

Doug Coughran AM is a Parks and Wildlife marine senior wildlife officer. He has led the whale disentanglement response team since its inception in 1995. For more information about whale disentanglements see 'Entangled whales: not your typical gentle giants', *LANDSCOPE*, Summer 2013–14. Doug can be contacted on (08) 9219 9849 or by email (douglas.coughran@dpaw.wa.gov.au).

If you suspect you have seen an entangled whale or any sick, injured or orphaned native wildlife contact the Wildcare Helpline on (08) 9474 9055.