

Beaked whales found in St. Francois lagoon

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On Sunday February 1 fly-fishing guides made an unusual discovery in the lagoon of St. Francois atoll. Two small whales were seen floating upside down, apparently dead on the surface of the water.

They returned to Alphonse after their day of fishing and reported the sighting to Island Conservation Society (ICS) conservation officer, Sam Balderson. From the descriptions that they gave and from photos that had been taken Sam could see that it was a species of beaked whale, but the exact species was difficult to determine.

Sightings of beaked whales are quite rare as they spend most of their time out in the open ocean, diving to incredible depths, therefore Sam was keen to go out and collect more information.

The following morning the ICS team, Sam and Chris Narty (ranger), took a boat across to St. Francois to investigate. With the help of the fly-fishing guides they were able to locate one of the whales stuck on a sand flat. Unfortunately overnight quite a lot of the whale had been eaten by sharks, making species determination even more difficult. However it was clearly a beaked whale, hard to determine the sex because of the damage caused by sharks.

Sam and Chris took as many measurements as possible (the length was 4.23m) and then took tissue samples for DNA analysis. It was decided that they should also try and keep the skeleton as a specimen.

However the body of the whale was still too heavy to try and tow with their small boat, so they decided to just keep the skull. Hopefully analysis of the specimens collected by whale experts will lead to a positive identification of the exact species of beaked whale.

The cause of death of these two whales is almost impossible to determine, but it was estimated that they had died very recently perhaps only the day before the bodies were found, as the meat appeared very fresh and there was almost no smell. Perhaps they had entered the lagoon and become lost in its complex maze of channels. Unable to find their way out, they may have beached themselves by trying to travel across the shallow sandbanks. We will never know.

ICS is currently working with Marine Conservation Society Seychelles (MCSS) to try to better understand the distribution and activity of whales and dolphins within Seychelles waters. This find therefore came at an interesting time and will help inform future work. We still know very little about these amazingly elusive creatures, and in order to protect them from potential threats we need to know where they are in the ocean. So this find is another important piece in the puzzle.



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