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Fin whale carcass turns up near Mad River Beach

John Driscoll/The Times-Standard

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Washed up on a deserted stretch of beach more than one mile south of Mad River Beach, a dead whale has been buffeted by the waves for the past several days.

It's the second fin whale to end up on local beaches in the last four years. Marine biologists from Humboldt State University's Vertebrate Museum have taken tissue samples to make sure it's a fin whale and not its bigger cousin, a blue whale. It's not clear what killed the 60-foot female whale.

"It was either there for a while or floating at sea for a while," said HSU marine biologist Dawn Goley.

Goley said there were no obvious external signs of trauma, as there might be if the whale had been struck by a ship. But then, the carcass is old and it's lying belly up.

Fin whales travel in small groups or even alone, plying the outer continental shelf for food. Fin whales are baleen whales. They gulp water and strain it through a curtain of fine "teeth" to recover plankton and small fish. Studies using acoustic technology suggest the whales are present off the North Coast from August to February.

How many fin whales live in the Pacific isn't known, but the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration cites estimates of up to 45,000 before whaling, and about 18,000 at the time that whaling was outlawed by the United States in 1970.

The whale is too far from an access point to try to salvage any parts, Goley said. But another, larger specimen was recovered in 2005 when it washed up on Freshwater Lagoon Beach. Biologists buried the 70-foot, 80-ton fin whale in the sand to allow microorganisms time to clean the bones of meat. The skeleton will eventually be displayed at the Vertebrate Museum.

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