

LONG-TERM MORTALITY TRENDS IN STRANDED CALIFORNIA CETACEANS

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From 1978 to 2006, post-mortem examinations were conducted on a total of 81 cetaceans that stranded along the San Diego County coastline in California. Peaks in short-beaked common dolphin (*Delphinus delphis*) strandings from 2003 through 2005 were largely attributed to domoic acid toxicosis, encephalopathy, and trauma. Peaks in long-beaked common dolphin (*Delphinus capensis*) strandings in 2004 and 2006 were attributed to trauma and domoic acid toxicosis, respectively. A bimodal trend in common dolphin (*Delphinus* spp.) strandings over time corresponds to cool oceanographic “anchovy regime” periods (pre 1978 and post late 1990s), suggesting domoic acid toxicosis or a *D.* spp. distribution shift as possible factors in these stranding events. Although 66.7% of bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) were necropsied during a peak in 1980, no clear trend in mortality diagnoses was apparent; this suggests that observed maladies may have been secondary to infectious or biotoxic agents unknown to researchers at that time. The findings of this study demonstrate that maladies may vary with environmental conditions and that the limitations of diagnostic evaluations necessitate proper banking of samples for future evaluations.