

Freedom Fighter

Ed Lyman '88G employs old whaling techniques to release humpbacks from lines and nets

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LAST SPRING, ON MARCH 2, ED LYMAN '88G was skimming through the water off the coast of Maui, Hawaii, his feet braced for balance, a taut line burning against his gloved hands, salt spray spitting across the bow of his inflatable craft, stinging his eyes. About 50 feet ahead of him, attached to the other end of the line, was a 40-ton humpback whale.

When the creature slowed, Lyman and his colleague, David Matilla, hauled themselves, hand over hand, up close behind the whale, who was trailing a monstrous tangle of fishing gear. The men clipped a buoy to the mess of lines, then dropped back, as the whale swam on, slowed by the drag of the gear and the buoy. They repeated this routine several times—a technique based on the old whaling tradition called "kegging," which involved barrels instead of buoys to slow the giants down and keep them from diving. The experience of being towed behind a whale, known as "a Nantucket sleigh ride," also derives its name from New England whaling expeditions.



After several hours, Lyman's whale finally tired enough for the team to move in with the flying knife, a curved blade on the end of a 40-foot pole that can be released, leaving the blade attached only to the end of a rope and allowing rescuers to manipulate the knife from a safe distance behind the whale.



Lyman worked carefully, methodically, as he has done on the 50 or so other whale rescues he has been involved with in the past dozen years. "You can work right behind a whale with the fluke brushing the boat and be pretty safe," says Lyman, who occasionally spends 10 or 20 seconds perched on the back of a whale when he

attaches a buoy. "We always try to let the animal know what we're doing, exactly where we are," he says.

Sometimes, of course, he can't avoid working in the danger zone, forward of the tail and flippers. Lyman once came eye-to-eye with a whale as he struggled to free a line running through its mouth. "He raised his head out of the water, almost as if he was trying to get a bead on us," says Lyman. "Then he took a swipe with his tail." In this case, the only thing the rescuers suffered was a good scare and a boat swamped with water. But whale rescue is a dangerous business, even for professionals. Well-meaning amateurs have occasionally lost their lives in over-zealous efforts to free tangled creatures.

Lyman is one of only eight or 10 people in the country who are trained and certified for whale disentanglement. Before moving to Hawaii, Lyman worked for the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries, where he worked with fishermen on reducing entanglement and occasionally helped to free right whales. Today, as rescue coordinator at NOAA's Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary, Lyman deals mostly with humpbacks, who return each year to breed and raise their young in these waters. Listed as an endangered species in the United States, the worldwide humpback population, once thought to be about 200,000, now hovers around 15,000.

When he's not out on "whale 911" calls, Lyman, who earned a master's in zoology at UNH, gives educational talks and presentations, as well as providing research assistance to scientists who need to get close to whales in order to study them. He is always at the ready, though, for calls that come in on the NOAA Fisheries Hotline from boaters or fishermen reporting a distressed marine mammal. Some of the calls, of course, are false alarms. Seen from a distance or through the water, a white flipper or even a calf swimming close to its mother can be mistaken for a tangle of fishing gear. Between 2001 and 2007, there were 146 reports of distressed marine mammals; 89 of these were entanglement situations. And 25 involved large whales.



WHALE 911: RESCUE COORDINATOR EDWARD LYMAN '88G,

ABOVE, PURSUES AN ENTANGLED HUMPBACK WHALE, BELOW.

Whales get caught in everything from fishing gear to buoy lines, moorings to marine debris. In some waters, as many as 75 percent of humpbacks bear scars of recent entanglements. Some great whales survive months entangled in gear, but over time, the lines can eventually rub the skin raw, causing wounds and infection and even lost limbs. Rope wrapped around a whale's tail, for example, can cut off circulation, causing the tail to become necrotic, and making it impossible for the whale to swim fast enough to feed.

Freeing whales, Lyman points out, is only half the battle. The gear retrieved provides important data about which fishing areas and types of gear are of primary concern. He also records each rescue, posting photos and videos on the sanctuary web site, providing a useful database of rescue information. Matilla, meanwhile, who founded the disentanglement program in Hawaii, trains rescue teams in Australia, Korea, Mexico and other countries around the world, building an international disentanglement network. The global nature of the whale entanglement issue is evident even in a single rescue: humpbacks in Hawaii are often found to be trailing gear from Alaskan waters, 2,500 miles north.



When calving season for the humpbacks is over in Hawaii, Lyman migrates with the whales, following them to their Alaskan feeding grounds, where he does workshops with fishermen. "The last thing they want to do is catch a whale," says Lyman, pointing out that it's costly for fishermen to lose gear this way. And, much as he relishes watching an entangled whale swim free, the number of whales Lyman rescues represents only a minute fraction of a very large problem. Some estimates suggest that 300,000 cetaceans (including whales and dolphins) worldwide become entangled each year in fishing gear. This figure, of course, includes only the ones who survive and bear the scars of their encounters. Others, who die before they can break free or be rescued, sink to the ocean floor and are never counted.

Much of Lyman's work with fishermen is focused on trying to come up with practical solutions to the problem. One idea being implemented in some coastal waters is the use of sinking lines, instead of buoyant ones, between traps. "A sinking line lies on the bottom, instead of in the water column where a whale can snag it in its mouth," explains Lyman. Of course, sinking line is more expensive because it's heavier, so the idea has met with some resistance from fishermen, who are concerned about costs.



Lyman has addressed these issues with fishermen on the East Coast, too, where the right whale, which feeds in heavily traveled shipping lanes, also suffers from entanglement. The 60-ton creatures are tireless swimmers and difficult to free because of their stamina and strength. But with a mere 350 right whales left in the North Atlantic, even one death due to entanglement is a significant loss. It's true that rescuing one whale, no matter how big, represents only a small victory in a literal sea of troubles. Still, every whale cut free from the fetters of manmade gear is yet one more reason to hope that, in the end, we can find a way to save all the giants of the deep.

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