

“Spirit”: the Gray Whale

In July 1999, a male juvenile gray whale washed ashore between Cape George and Middlepoint, where it was discovered by people walking the beach. Scientists were called in from Cascadia Research Collective, WDFW, the Burke Museum, and the Whale Museum to assess its age and condition. The dead whale was given the designation CRC458.

Based on the undeveloped sutures in his skull and (comparatively) short body length (approximately 30 feet compared to 50 feet for an adult whale) CRC458 was probably between 1-2 years old when he died. He also appeared emaciated, with only about half of the blubber of a typical whale his age.

CRC458 was one of 26 gray whales found dead on Washington shores between January 1999 and July 1999. These strandings themselves were part of a larger trend: The years 1999 and 2000 were designated an Unusual Mortality Event (UME) by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) after an unusually high number of gray whale strandings were reported along the West Coast during that period. (283 whales stranded between Mexico and Alaska in 1999, increasing to 368 whale strandings in 2000 for the same area. For comparison, the West Coast only saw an average of 10 gray whale strandings per year between 1980-1995 .)

[See report [here](#) for more information on the 1999 UME.]

PTMSC received permission from NMFS to collect and use CRC458’s skeleton for education. That summer, PTMSC volunteers flensed the whale (removed decomposing flesh), cleaned, and eventually labelled each bone. Part of this process included wrapping the bones in netting and hanging them from our pier, so that decomposers and scavengers living in the water could do a final cleaning. The bones were then put in a greenhouse, so the oils left in the bones could disperse. They were then coated with epoxy sealant in an effort to make them resistant to wear and tear from handling.

The name “Spirit” was given to the whale after a comment by a young student who was moved by our whale’s story and the tragedy of a baby whale dying. She then said, “But really, he’s here in spirit, isn’t he?” Since he’s been the inspiration for so much education on gray whales here at PTMSC, we’d have to agree!