

Maritime Rescue Institute Coastal Notes – 7 September 2005

For the first time in years, around 12 boats up to 24m in length are working off the Kincardineshire coast. However, they are not fishing for cod and haddock, nor are they seeking herring and mackerel: their target is squid. Squid have always been found around these coasts, but it's only recently that they have been abundant enough to support a fishery. There has always been a small fishery on the West Coast, then about 3 years ago the Fraserburgh boats started finding good catches; now they have reached our coast. Perhaps this is more evidence of global warming.

The bulk of these catches are landed onto Aberdeen fish market and end up in restaurants in southern Europe. These squid are rarely larger than 60cm and most will be much smaller. However, depending upon the species, their size ranges from 3cm to more than 20m. Giant squid have long been the stuff of sailor's tales and folklore, but scientists now know that they really do exist, growing up to 18m. Recently in Antarctica, an immature colossal squid was recovered virtually intact from the surface of the sea. This creature has to be one of the scariest things on the planet: not only does it have a huge tearing beak, and enormous suckers, it also has swivelling hooks on clubs at the end of the tentacles. It's speculated that it could reach away in excess of 20m when fully grown. Given that a bus is around 8m long and a sperm whale reaches around 15m, this is one big beast.

Sperm whales feed on the large squid, but it is by no means a one-sided battle; whales have been found with scars on their snouts suggesting that they have struggled with creatures with suckers up to 13cm across.

Squid are funny creatures. They aren't fish, but molluscs, meaning that they belong to the same family as scallops, snails and octopus. They retain the remnant of their long gone shell deep inside their bodies; often this, the cuttlebone, can be found washed up on our beaches. They have 10 tentacles that trail behind their streamlined bodies and swim by jet propulsion making them extremely agile. If cornered, they can further confuse their enemy by blasting a cloud of black ink from a tube like funnel near its head.

Their eyes are very elaborate; they can distinguish polarised light –which humans cannot – and can see in much finer detail than we can. They hold the record for the largest eye in the animal kingdom. This was found on a giant squid in New Zealand that was recorded at 21m in length with eyes 40cm in diameter. These are intelligent creatures that use their speed and exceptional eyesight to evade would be predators; it also probably explains why so few of the large squid are ever caught – they just see the nets coming and avoid them.

On a different note, MRI lost a good friend this week. Bobby Jackson was a highly valued member of the SAR Team for 6 years. Even after he was no longer a member, he was very supportive and worked away in the background for us, as recently as the Harbour Festival. We will all sorely miss him. Our thoughts are with his family at this very difficult time.

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