

Mass Stranding of *Steno bredanensis* in Belize

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Thirteen rough-toothed dolphins, *Steno bredanensis*, were found dead several hundred feet north of the Sibun River on November 11, 1981 (Fig. 1). The dolphins lay scattered with the high tide flotsam along a 200–300 foot stretch of sandy beach that sloped very gradually into deeper waters of the Northern Shelf Lagoon (maximum depth 50 feet). This body of water terminates about 15 miles off-shore at the Belize Barrier Reef, a 150 mile bulwark extending the length of the country and cut in several places by narrow channels.

Twelve of the animals were intact, and one was dismembered with its skull and some bones strewn over the shallows just off the beach. Of the intact dolphins, seven were males and five were females. All were adult size, ranging from 7.0 to 9.4 feet in length (\bar{x} = 8.0 feet). Most of their skin and eyes were missing, probably due to being fed upon by turkey and black vultures, which were roosting in nearby trees. Because of the state of decomposition and the lack of equipment, necropsies were not performed. No apparent cause for their death could be ascertained.

This stranding is the first one recorded for this species in Belize and is the only mass stranding event known for cetacea in this area. Other mass strandings of *Steno* have occurred throughout the world, including West Africa, Indonesia, Hawaii and Florida (Schmidly 1981, Watson 1981, J. Mead, pers. comm.). *Steno* is considered to be a pelagic, deep water species, found in tropical and sub-tropical oceans, but also in the Mediterranean and Red Seas (Ridgway 1971, Walker 1975, Perrin and Walker 1975, Watson 1981).



FIGURE 1. Stranded *Steno bredanensis* in Belize.

Individuals of this species are infrequently encountered and little is known of their habits. They have been sighted in large groups of up to 50 animals (Leatherwood *et al.* 1976, Schmidly 1981). They also have been seen in mixed groups with *Stenella attenuata* and *S. longirostris* and netted with these species by tuna purse seiners in the Eastern Tropical Pacific (Perrin and Walker 1975). Karen Pryor (pers. comm.) thinks members of the species *Steno* hunt and feed in packs. More recently, Jim Mead (pers. comm.) found the head of a reef fish in the stomach of one *Steno* and the tail part of the same fish in the stomach of a second *Steno* which had beached in a mass stranding event in Hawaii. Layne (1965) has also found octopus and fish in the stomach of a *Steno* in Florida. Other life history information for this species is scarce or undetermined. Behind the barrier reef in Belize, the bottle-nosed dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*) is commonly seen in shallower waters, and the Atlantic spotted dolphin (*Stenella plagiodon*) is often observed in deeper areas. To date, no positive sightings of live rough-toothed dolphins have been made in Belize, presumably due to their preference for offshore environments. To what extent, if any, *Steno bredanensis* inhabits the relatively shallow continental shelf waters of Belize remains unknown.

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