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Notes on stranded dugong in Pavillion Island, Taytay, Palawan, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

A live stranding of a female dugong *Dugong dugon* (Müller, 1776) Palmer, 1895 occurred in Pavillion Island, Taytay Bay, Palawan on 11 July 2024. However, the weak animal died about two hours after it was spotted. It measured 2.75 m (straight total length) and weighed approximately 300 kg. Other than minor scratches on the skin, no signs of physical injury or evidence of fishery interaction were observed. During necropsy, nylon strands were found in the stomach extending to the small intestine. Although the cause of death remained inconclusive, this incident reflects the threats of discarded fishing nets and plastic pollution to large marine mammals like the dugong in Palawan waters.

Keywords: discarded fishing nets, marine mammal, plastic pollution, threatened species

On 11 July 2024, at around 0815 h, the Municipal Agriculture Office (MAO) received a report from one of its fish wardens in Pavillion Island (10°53'39.81"N, 119°37'8.73"E), Taytay Bay (Figure 1) about a stranded female dugong (*Dugong dugon*). The MAO immediately reported the incident to the Community Environment and Natural Resources Office (CENRO). Upon receiving the report, the CENRO team, together with representatives from the MAO, the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development (PCSD), and Community-Centred Conservation (C3) Philippines, responded to the incident two hours after the report.

Upon arrival at the stranding site at around 1000 h, the warden reported that the dugong was found

alive at around 0600 h but showed signs of reduced energy and was too lethargic to escape from approaching threats. They found the animal swimming in the shallow sandy waters of the island, and they thought that it was drowning since it was not even responding when they were approaching. Thus, they decided to ask for intervention from the team of CENRO, PCSD and C3 Philippines, and before the team could intervene, the animal stopped breathing. The dugong was an adult female, measuring 2.75 m in straight total length and weighing approximately 300 kg (Table 1). Upon thorough external examination, a few minor scratches were found on the skin of the dugong's belly and flippers. There were no signs of lacerations, entanglement, or other injuries (Figure 2).



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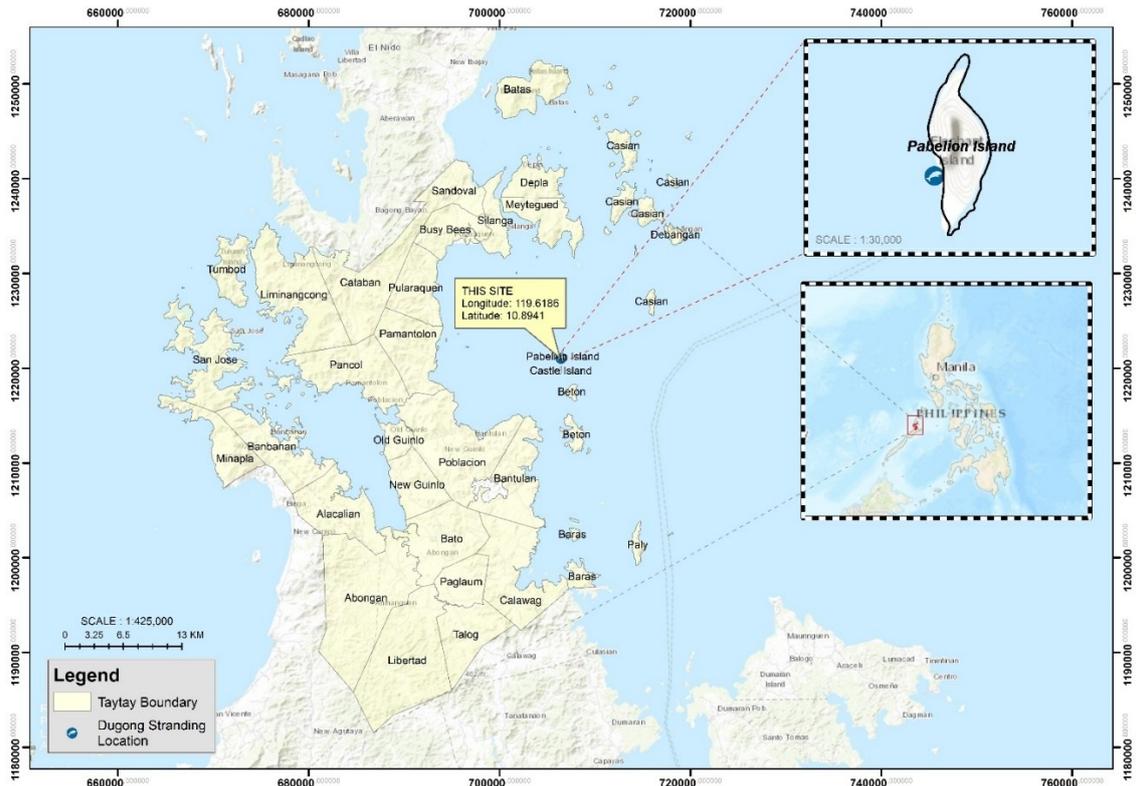


Figure 1. The location of the stranded dugong in Pavilion Island, Taytay, Palawan, Philippines.

Table 1. Some measurements of the stranded dugong in Pavilion Island, Taytay, Palawan, Philippines.

Measurement	
Straight length	275 cm
Weight	~300 kg
Tip of snout to tip of fluke	284 cm
Tip of snout to center of anus	184 cm
Tip of snout to center of genital aperture	174 cm
Tip of snout to center of umbilicus	120 cm
Tip of snout to anterior end of flipper	54 cm
Tip of snout to center of eye	23 cm
Tip of snout to external ear	41 cm
Center of eye to ear	26 cm
Distance between centers of eyes	31 cm
Center of eye to center of nostril	19 cm
Flipper length, anterior to tip	38 cm
Flipper length, axilla to tip	69 cm

A joint team led by representatives from MAO, C3 Philippines, PCSD, the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG), Large Marine Vertebrates (LAMAVE), and the CENRO – Taytay conducted a necropsy on 12 July 2024. The team found 0.50 mm nylon strands (Figure 3) in its stomach up to the small intestine.

Observations of the internal lining of the stomach and small intestine showed an accumulation of nylon strands about 3 m long in the small intestine, causing rupture and inflammation, which probably contributed to the animal’s system failure, weakening, and stranding.



Figure 2. The stranded dugong in Pavillion Island, Taytay, Palawan. A) Some minor scratches on the ventral side of the carcass; B) The dugong carcass being moved to the beach, C) Orientation and necropsy of the dugong carcass, D) Dugong head, side view.



Figure 3. Nylon strands (A, B and C) and rupture (D) were found in the stomach and small intestines of the dugong.

The nylon strands could have been part of discarded fishing nets, such as those used in hook-and-line fishing, commonly used in the area to catch fish such as groupers. This can also be part of the ghost fishing gears left in the area that could have been discarded and had settled in a seagrass bed. As such, these nylon strands were then taken up by the dugong with the seagrass while foraging.

Discarded fishing nets are a common and increasingly serious problem in Palawan (Sajorne et al. 2021) and other parts of the world (Chellia et al. 2024), a leading cause of entanglement of large marine species globally (Perroca et al. 2024). More documentation of such incidents, not only with dugongs but with other marine wildlife, is badly needed to assess the effects and severity of this threat in the Philippines.

This incident is clear evidence that ingestion of plastics, particularly those from fishing gear, occurs in dugongs in their seagrass habitat. The consequences of such ingestion could be fatal to marine wildlife and will remain a threat if not addressed. More dugongs and other large marine species' lives remain at stake unless fishers discard their nets responsibly. Continued efforts are needed to address marine pollution to protect large marine species, including the dugong.

FUNDING

This was conducted in line with the duty of the authors who are affiliated with their respective organizations.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The intention was to rescue the dugong and return it safely to its natural habitat, but the dugong died before the team could take action.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest among authors.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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