

Porpoises died from blood poisoning

The dead porpoises that washed up on the shores of the Wadden islands last summer probably died from erysipelas.

This is the conclusion drawn by marine biologist Mardik Leopold of Wageningen Marine Research. The bacterium *Erysipelothrix rhusiopathiae* was found in three quarters of the 22 porpoises that were examined. This bacterium can cause erysipelas (a form of septicaemia, or blood poisoning). It is known as a disease that occurs in pigs and turkeys but it is also found in fish.

The bacterium was found in various organs of the infected porpoises, which had been dead for some time. The bacterium has not previously been found in beached porpoises. There are also no cases reported in the literature of large-scale deaths from this bacterium. 'But I think we have found the culprit,' says Leopold.

Smoking gun

Last summer, some 160 dead porpoises washed up on the shores of the Wadden islands over a period of 10 days. That is a lot. Normally, about 600 porpoises a year wash up along the whole of the Dutch coast. So the ministry of Agriculture asked WUR and Utrecht University to investigate the reason for the striking deaths. One aspect WUR examined was what the porpoises had eaten.

Leopold sees the discovery of the bacterium as a 'smoking gun'. 'We were also able to rule out many other possible causes of the deaths,' he says. The animals may have got the disease after eating infected fish. Leopold hopes to find more clues in a batch of sprat from the same area as the porpoises. 'I'm curious to see whether we can cultivate the bacterium from the fish,' he says. ^{RK}