

Whale Godfried shows how it works

Beached dead whales don't necessarily need to be removed and disposed of. Leaving the carcasses to rot in suitable places is a good option too.

That is the conclusion of a study by researchers from Wageningen University on the effects of the decomposition process in a beached minke whale deposited on Rottumerplaat sandbank in the Wadden Sea.

The whale Godfried, named after the writer Godfried Bomans, was found on Rottumerplaat at the end of 2020. The Directorate-General for Public Works and Water Management (Rijkswaterstaat) and the nature management agency Staatsbosbeheer decided to leave the animal to decompose at a suitable spot. Wageningen Marine Research monitored the process carefully for seven months. The provisional conclusion is that nature benefits.

Beetles

'Insects, in particular, benefit from this for years,' explains lead researcher Martin Baptist. The carcass attracted a total of 57 different species of beetle, including the carrion beetles *Nicrophorus vespillo* and *Necrodes littoralis*. Of the beetles, 21 species had never been found on the island before. Some of the beetles came from the mainland, attracted by the smell of the rotting whale.



The state of the carcass was studied meticulously • Photo Martin Baptist

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ments and make notes. Cameras were used to monitor the carcass continuously. And the carcass is not gone yet, by any means. Baptist estimates that it could take another three years before the flesh and skin have decomposed completely.

Nitrogen

As well as insects, the surrounding nature benefits from rotting carcasses too.

The smell is not too bad for humans, though. The researchers visited the carcass every other month to take measure-

ments and make notes. Cameras were used to monitor the carcass continuously. And the carcass is not gone yet, by any means. Baptist estimates that it could take another three years before the flesh and skin have decomposed completely. According to Baptist, nutrients seeping into the soil mean that the nearby vegetation is literally greener and grows taller. 'That is because of that barrage of ingredients. But close to the carcass, plants die because of the high concentration of nitrogen. It is so high that it becomes toxic.' It remains to be seen whether Rijkswaterstaat will return dead whales to nature again more often in future. But project leader Rick Hoeksema is certainly enthusiastic. 'Normally we dispose of a large carcass like that. Now it turns out that it fulfils a function in the ecosystem. You might predict that, but it's still amazing to see that it really does work that way in practice.' ^{RK}