

“I was completely inside’: Lobster diver swallowed by humpback whale off Provincetown”

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PROVINCETOWN — At a little before 8 a.m. Friday, veteran lobster diver Michael Packard entered the water for his second dive of the day.

His vessel, the “Ja’n J,” was off Herring Cove Beach and surrounded by a fleet of boats catching striped bass. The water temperature was a balmy 60 degrees and the visibility about 20 feet.

Licensed commercial lobster divers literally pluck lobsters off the sandy bottom, and as Packard, 56, dove down Friday morning, he saw schools of sand lances and stripers swimming by.

'This is how you die': One year later, Michael Packard recalls escape from whale's mouth



The ocean food chain was in full evidence, but about 10 feet from the bottom Packard suddenly knew what it truly felt like to be part of that chain.

In something truly biblical, Packard was swallowed whole by a humpback whale.

“All of a sudden, I felt this huge shove and the next thing I knew it was completely black,” Packard recalled Friday afternoon following his release from Cape Cod Hospital in Hyannis.

“I could sense I was moving, and I could feel the whale squeezing with the muscles in his mouth,” he said.



Has a man ever been swallowed by a whale:Sperm whale swallows a Cape Cod man off Cape Verde islands 150 years ago

Initially, Packard thought he was inside a great white shark, but he couldn't feel any teeth and he hadn't suffered any obvious wounds. It quickly dawned on him that he had been swallowed by a whale.

"I was completely inside; it was completely black," Packard said. "I thought to myself, 'there's no way I'm getting out of here. I'm done, I'm dead.' All I could think of was my boys — they're 12 and 15 years old."

A man was swallowed by a whale: How do we know it is true?

Outfitted with scuba gear, he struggled and the whale began shaking its head so that Packard could tell he didn't like it. He estimated he was in the whale for 30 to 40 seconds before the whale finally surfaced.

"I saw light, and he started throwing his head side to side, and the next thing I knew I was outside (in the water)," said Packard, who lives in Wellfleet.

Watch humpback whales get rescued:Whale rescuers free humpback from fishing gear near Stellwagen Bank, MA

First Light Boatworks:Adventurer Guirec Soudée set to cross Atlantic from Chatham to home in France

Packard's sister, Cynthia Packard, spoke with crewman Josiah Mayo, who relayed some of the details to her. Packard said Mayo saw the whale burst to the surface, and that he initially thought it was a great white shark.

"There was all this action at the top of the water," Packard said Mayo told her. Then the whale flung her brother back into the sea. Mayo picked him up, called by radio to shore and sped back to the Provincetown pier. A Provincetown Fire Department ambulance took him to Cape Cod Hospital.

"Thank God, it wasn't a white shark. He sees them all the time out there," said Cynthia Packard. "He must have thought he was done."

How do humpback whales eat?

"Based on what was described, this would have to be a mistake and an accident on the part of the humpback," said Jooke Robbins, director of Humpback Whale Studies at the Center for Coastal Studies in Provincetown. Humpbacks are not aggressive animals, particularly toward humans, she said.

'I want to apologize to the whale': Lobster diver tells humpback tale on 'Jimmy Kimmel'

The humpback was described by Mayo as being medium-sized, Michael Packard said, and Robbins suspects it was a juvenile feeding on sand lance. When a humpback opens its mouth to feed, it billows out like a parachute, blocking the animal's forward vision, which is why so many become entangled in fishing gear in their mouth and jaws, said Robbins.

Even so, incidents of feeding humpbacks injuring swimmers and divers, especially instances of swallowing them, are so exceedingly rare as to be nonexistent, Robbins said. The esophagus on nontoothed whales is too small to actually swallow a human but they could wrap their mouth around a large object and then spit it out. Robbins said that, unlike toothed whales such as Orcas, baleen whales that filter out small schooling fish do not explore or cause injuries with their mouths. They generally use their tail.

"It is not something I have heard happening before," Robbins said of the incident Friday. "So many things would have had to happen to end up in the path of a feeding whale."

How was a man swallowed by a whale?

Charles "Stormy" Mayo, a senior scientist and whale expert at the Center for Coastal Studies, agreed it was likely an accidental encounter. It requires a federal permit for professional photographers and researchers to get close to whales underwater, but there are areas of the world where it is generally allowed.

"People direct dive on them (humpbacks) in the tropics, not here. In those places I'm not aware of a single incident of people having problems with them," Mayo said.

Packard crewman Josiah Mayo is Stormy Mayo's son.

Climate Change:A whale of a reminder: Nantucket sculpture raises awareness of ocean littering dangers

“Michael (Packard) is a smart guy and an exceptional diver,” Stormy Mayo said. “For that to happen to him, you can be sure he did everything he was supposed to do.”

Packard was released from Cape Cod Hospital Friday afternoon with what he described as “a lot of soft tissue damage” but no broken bones. He said he’d return to diving as soon as he was healed.



What do lobster divers do?

Commercial lobster divers are a tough breed. They brave the cold waters off Provincetown to grab migrating lobsters off a sandy shelf when they emerge from an adjacent deep channel scoured out by the powerful current rounding Race Point.

It's a spot that is fraught with danger. The crewman topside keeps track of the diver below by following his bubbles as he is pushed by those strong currents. Divers have been dragged out to sea — that happened to Packard once and he treaded water for hours before being rescued — and he once found and recovered the dead body of a fellow diver.

Packard has had his share of close calls. For years, he was an abalone diver on the West Coast in an area with great white sharks that have a history of attacking divers; he lost some friends to the predators.

Sharks and seals:Here's what you need to know about the animals off Cape Cod

Monomoy Island:Wisconsin man's inaugural sail left him 'lucky to be alive' off Chatham

Michael Packard also survived a plane crash

Ten years ago, while traveling in Costa Rica, he was a passenger in a small plane that crashed in the jungle, killing the pilot, co-pilot and a passenger. Packard sustained multiple serious injuries to his abdomen and upper body. The rescuers that found the remaining five passengers after two nights in the jungle said they wouldn't have survived another night.

Cape Cod fishing:Cape Cod lobstermen get free gear to protect endangered right whales

Packard thinks he may be the last lobster diver in Provincetown.

“It’s a strenuous job,” said charter boat fisherman Dave “Spider” Gibson, standing on Provincetown’s MacMillan Pier Friday afternoon. “He’s the best lobster diver I’ve ever seen. He knows what he’s doing.”

Mary Ann Bragg contributed to this story.

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