



*A dead whale being towed away to a deserted beach in Puerto Madryn, Argentina, on Tuesday. AFP PIC*

## HARMFUL ALGAL BLOOM

# Argentina whale deaths may be due to 'red tides'

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**BUENOS AIRES:** A string of whale deaths in recent days in southern Argentina has worried scientists, who think a micro-algae could be to blame.

From Sept 24 to Oct 2, at least 13 southern right whales died in the Nuevo Gulf close to the Valdés Peninsula in Argentine Patagonia, an area that is a sanctuary and breeding ground for the huge mammals, the Whale Conservation Institute (ICB) said.

Authorities have started performing autopsies on the whales

that have been recovered and have begun testing the water and mollusks "to determine the presence of possible biotoxins linked to the proliferation of harmful algal blooms known as red tides," said whale programme coordinator Agustina Donini on Monday.

None of the whales observed had displayed any signs of injuries or trauma, and all were well-fed, the ICB said.

The deaths come at a time when authorities have been celebrating a 50-year-high number

of cetaceans for the season in an area that attracts whale-watching tourists.

The large number of dead whales in such a short space of time suggests that "a local environmental variable" was to blame, said another whale programme director, Marcella Uhart.

Algal blooms produce natural toxins that can be harmful to other organisms living in the water. Their pigment can make the water surface look red, hence the phenomenon name "red tide".

Puerto Piramides town mayor Fabian Gandon said there had been "an unusual increase in... red tides" in the Nuevo and San Jose gulfs.

The local population has been advised to avoid eating mollusks, which can store the toxins created by the algal blooms.

Despite the recent deaths, authorities have recorded more than 1,400 whales in the Nuevo and San Jose gulfs, the largest number in more than 50 years.

**AFP**