

Beach Balls

Beach balls are prickly balls that look like balls of straw and are found on beaches. They are sometimes sold in gift shops as “whale burps,” “whale barf balls,” or “whale fur balls.”

Beach balls are not produced by whales. They usually are made of vegetation such as sea grass or dune grass, mixed with other materials such as fishing line, snail egg cases from tidepools, pine needles, bits of seaweed, or woody twigs.

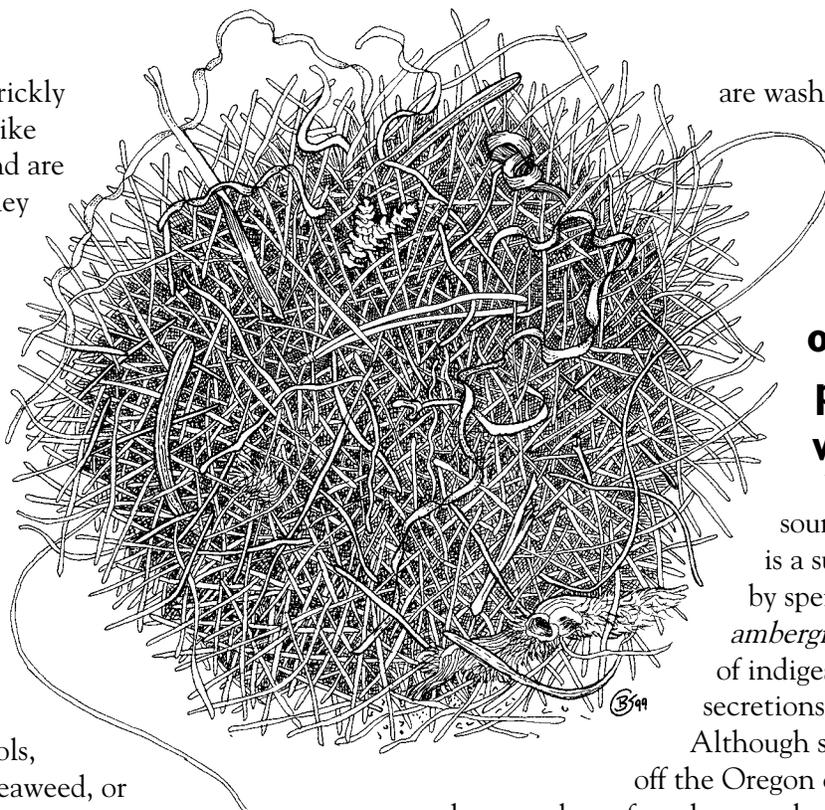
The balls may be perfectly round or oval. Most are about the size pictured here, but may be much larger.

Where can you find beach balls?

Beach balls are found all over the world. OSU scientists have reported finding balls made of fine vegetative strands on Egyptian beaches. Australians report finding beach balls twice the size of a large orange. They are even found on the shores of lakes. An article in *Science Monthly* in 1948 described balls found at Little Borax Lake, California, made of common ditch grass and ranging from an inch to more than a foot in diameter.

How are beach balls made?

To our knowledge no one has formally researched how beach balls are formed, but speculation points to surf action. As a wave approaches shore it drags on the shore floor, causing the wave crest to curl and crash onto the beach. This curling motion may roll materials in the surf into balls. At high tide the balls



are washed high on the beach and deposited there by the retreating tide.

Are any kind of beach balls produced by whales?

No, but one possible source of the confusion is a substance produced by sperm whales called *ambergris*, which is made up of indigestible squid parts and secretions from the whale's gut.

Although sperm whales occur off the Oregon coast, no ambergris has ever been found on our beaches. It is found on tropical and subtropical beaches.

Upon exposure to sunlight and air, ambergris quickly changes from a black, soft, smelly substance to a grey or black, pleasantly aromatic, hard, waxy substance. Squid beaks can be seen embedded in the mass.

Ambergris is rare and once was valued as a fixative for perfumes because it makes other fragrances last longer. It is said that a single drop of tincture of ambergris applied to paper and placed in a book will remain fragrant for 40 years. Handling ambergris leaves the fingers smelling of it for days, even after several washings.

Illustration 1999 by Barbara B. Gleason



Written by Vicki Osis, marine education specialist, Extension Sea Grant, Oregon State University.