



NOAA FISHERIES

Pacific Islands
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Marine Mammal Strandings in Hawai'i

An overview and answers to frequently asked questions about marine mammal strandings in the Hawaiian Islands



Approximately 20 cetacean (whale and dolphin) strandings occur in the Hawaiian Islands in an average year. The Pacific Islands Regional Office (PIRO) of NOAA Fisheries, along with various partners, responds to these strandings to provide veterinary care for sick or injured animals and to retrieve carcasses of deceased animals. When we retrieve marine mammal carcasses, we try, whenever possible, to determine the cause of the stranding and gather other important information about the marine mammal species and marine environment in Hawai'i. PIRO makes efforts to engage Hawaiian cultural practitioners in marine mammal stranding responses, whenever possible. We invite participation by cultural practitioners to help us be culturally respectful to the individual animal and to the community where the stranding occurs. Our goal is to continue to expand this effort, while remaining in compliance with the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) and Endangered Species Act (ESA).

What Is a Marine Mammal Stranding?

Stranding is a general term used to refer to situations when marine mammals (whales, dolphins, and seals) swim or float onto shore and become "beached" or unable to return to the sea. Strandings can result from many different causes, including disease, injury, entanglement, disorientation, and starvation. As air-breathing mammals, whales and dolphins may strand when they become incapacitated and seek physical protection.

While most stranded cetaceans are found dead or die very soon after stranding, some stranded cetaceans remain alive. In most cases, these animals can not be saved and are humanely euthanized to relieve their suffering. The decision to euthanize is made in close consultation with our veterinarians to ensure humane treatment of the animal, reduce risks (such as disease) to the larger animal population, and reduce safety risks for our response team and the general public.

Authorized stranding responders may attempt to “refloat” live stranded animals, but this is only attempted in cases where very specific animal health and public safety conditions are met. These cases often involve attempting to refloat healthy animals that strand either because they followed a sick member of their social group to the shore or because they have become disoriented due to storms or other factors.

After the death of a stranded marine mammal, NOAA Fisheries works with authorized partner organizations to conduct post-mortem examinations. These examinations frequently involve conducting a necropsy (animal autopsy) to determine the cause of the stranding and obtain information about Hawai‘i cetacean populations, local ecosystem health, and the occurrence of diseases that may affect marine mammals or other species. Post-mortem examinations can also help identify signs of human interaction, such as foreign body ingestion, entanglement, acoustic impacts, and intentional killings.

All marine mammals (live, dead, and body parts) are protected by the MMPA. The 1992 Amendments to the MMPA formalized the Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program and designated NOAA Fisheries as the lead agency to coordinate related activities. Stranding networks are now established in all coastal states to respond to marine mammal strandings. NOAA Fisheries regional offices authorize organizations and individuals participating in stranding networks to help ensure the safety and

welfare of both animals and humans. Through a regional coordinator, regional offices, including PIRO, oversee, coordinate, and authorize response activities, and provide personnel training and other support.

What Should I Do (and Not Do) If I Encounter a Stranded Marine Mammal?

Immediately contact the NOAA Fisheries toll-free marine mammal hotline: (888) 256-9840, whenever you encounter a stranded marine mammal. It is helpful if you are able to remain on the scene to provide information to the response team while they are on the way and when they arrive. Always maintain a safe distance from the stranded animal and take whatever precautions are necessary to ensure your safety and the safety of those around you.

Never attempt to push live stranded marine mammals back into the water. Pushing an animal back out in the water usually prolongs their suffering and makes it more difficult for response staff and veterinarians to render aid when they arrive. Never touch or handle a live or dead marine mammal; even small dolphins can be quite powerful and unpredictable and can cause serious injury when untrained people attempt to hold or move them. Disease transmission from live and dead marine mammals to humans and dogs is also a risk.

Who Is Authorized to Respond to Marine Mammal Strandings?

NOAA Fisheries maintains a permitted program, the Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program, which oversees and regulates all responses to stranded marine mammals in the United States. To be in compliance with federal law, all responders must be authorized as a regional stranding network participant through an MMPA Stranding Agreement (in accordance with MMPA Section 112(c)



and section 403), or through MMPA Section 109(h), which gives authority to state and local government officials and employees to humanely take marine mammals in the course of their official duties under certain conditions. Across the United States, there are nearly 120 organizations that are authorized via MMPA stranding agreements to participate in stranding responses.

To be authorized to participate in marine mammal stranding responses, nongovernmental organizations must be issued an MMPA Stranding Agreement by NOAA Fisheries. To be considered for issuance of a Stranding Agreement, organizations must meet several established criteria. These criteria specify qualifications and requirements, including lead individuals qualified to oversee the program with prior marine mammal expertise, access to marine mammal veterinary services, personnel and facility



capacity, and resources to carry out a diverse array of response activities. Staff and volunteers must receive periodic training to comply with regulations, and to learn about new techniques with oversight from a NOAA Fisheries Regional Stranding Coordinator.

Unless you are an appropriately authorized individual, you should not physically interact with (handle, hold, pour water over, etc.) a whale, dolphin or monk seal. Unauthorized interaction with a stranded marine mammal may be considered an unlawful “take” under the MMPA.

Take is defined under the MMPA as “to harass, hunt, capture, or kill, or attempt to harass, hunt, capture, or kill any marine mammal” (16 U.S.C. 1362) and further defined by regulation (50 CFR 216.3) as “to harass, hunt, capture, collect, or kill, or attempt to harass, hunt, capture, collect, or kill any marine mammal. This includes, without limitation, any of the following: The collection of dead animals, or parts thereof; the restraint or detention of a marine mammal, no matter how temporary; tagging a marine mammal; any negligent or intentional act which results in disturbing or molesting a marine

mammal; and feeding or attempting to feed a marine mammal in the wild.”

How Have We Recognized Marine Mammals As Important in Hawaiian Culture?

Through partnerships with cultural practitioners, researchers, and others, PIRO has worked hard to become better informed about the Hawaiian cultural significance of marine mammals. We

have worked with partners across the state to learn about a variety of traditions, practices, and customs, as well as local knowledge related to marine mammals held by a large number of individuals and communities. We often work with practitioners associated with specific ahupua’a (land divisions) to help incorporate and perpetuate traditional practices and protocols.

Our overriding goal is to handle marine mammals in a culturally appropriate manner to the maximum extent allowable considering the law and human safety. Hawaiian cultural practitioners, including kūpuna (elders) and kumu (teachers), have participated in stranding response events to oversee and guide traditional

and customary practices and to conduct various cultural protocols, including mele pule and/or oli (prayers, chants), for live and deceased marine mammals. In several cases, PIRO has made arrangements so that skeletal remains or cremated remains of stranded marine mammals have been buried on land or placed in the ocean directly by cultural practitioners. In other situations, particularly in the case of large whales, burial on land has occurred with practitioners conducting cultural protocol before and during the burial.

What Are Some Examples of How We Have Worked With Hawaiian Cultural Practitioners?

Since 2005, PIRO has worked to include Hawaiian cultural practitioners in numerous marine mammal responses. Examples include:

Kaua’i – Cultural protocols were conducted for an orca at the stranding location on Po’lipū beach and at the burial site in 2008. Cultural protocols were conducted on several occasions for dead monk seals, including at Po’ipū for a monk seal that died from a gunshot wound in 2009.

O’ahu – In 2015, cultural protocols for a stranded pilot whale in He’eia, Kāne’ohe, were conducted at the time of stranding and later during placement of the whale’s ashes. In 2016, the remains from two dolphins were placed in waters off Waimanalo under direction of a practitioner.

Maui – Protocols involving the remains of humpback whales, a false killer whale, and Risso’s dolphin were conducted at various locations, including Olowalu, Waihe’e, Wai’ehu, Hamakuapoko, and Keawakapu.

Moloka’i – In 2010, protocols, involving students, were conducted at the location of a pilot whale stranding and at the burial site in Hālawa valley.

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Lānaʻi – Protocol was conducted at a humpback whale stranding location near Shipwrecks Beach in 2013.

Kahoʻolawe – Skeletal remains of a bottlenose dolphin were returned for traditional disposition in 2009. In 2018, a humpback whale skeleton from the Bishop Museum’s Maritime Center was interred in the waters off Kahoʻolawe under the guidance of cultural practitioners.

Hawaiʻi Island – In 2018, an ash scattering protocol was conducted at Miloliʻi for a spinner dolphin and a protocol for beaked whale was conducted at Ka Lae (South Point) in 2012. Ash scattering protocol was conducted at Kēōkea in 2018 for a monk seal that had died in a fishery interaction in 2017.

How Are Marine Mammal Parts Distributed to Interested Parties?

Following the rules implementing the MMPA and ESA, PIRO may grant access to marine mammal parts (such as skeletal remains, baleen, or tissues) for research purposes. Researchers must demonstrate a bona fide academic research endeavor. PIRO may also provide marine mammal parts for educational purposes to an acknowledged educational facility or equivalent. Interested individuals may send a letter of request to possess a marine mammal part for research or education purposes to PIRO. We will review the request considering the MMPA requirements and, if the request is authorized, we will issue a letter authorizing the retention of the part for educational or research use. The MMPA’s implementing regulations (50 CFR 216.22(c)(5) and 50 CFR 216.37(a)) authorize the transfer of marine mammal parts if: (1) the person/agency transferring the part does not receive payment for the part; (2) the



marine mammal part is transferred for scientific research purposes, curation in a professionally accredited scientific collection, or educational objectives; (3) an accession number, authorized or assigned by NOAA Fisheries, is affixed to the marine mammal part; and, (4) the marine mammal part is shipped in a manner in keeping with shipping regulations and the part is prepared in a manner that does not pose a human and/or domestic or wild animal health threat.

How Are We Further Promoting Collaboration With Practitioners and Community Members?

Over the past several years, PIRO has funded contractors to serve as cultural liaisons and invited grant proposals focused on facilitating enhanced collaboration on stranding response with Hawaiian cultural practitioners and community members. In addition, partnerships with Hawaiian practitioners and community leaders are priorities included in several agency plans, including the Main Hawaiian Islands

Monk Seal Management Plan and PIRO Strategic Plan.

One of our key long-term goals is to establish a partnership with an entity to effectively represent practitioners and facilitate communication and coordination with PIRO. The objectives of this partnership are to develop a set of guidelines for cultural participation, establish a system for evaluating and coordinating practitioner requests for marine mammal parts, and further developing the broader network of practitioners to work with PIRO to integrate Hawaiian cultural practices within our marine mammal protection, recovery and response efforts.

