

# SAfricans begin removing bodies of beached whales

May 31 2009

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People seen as they attempt to save a whale, on the beach, in Kommitjie, South Africa, Saturday, May 30, 2009. Dozens of false killer whales beached Saturday morning near the storm-lashed tip of South Africa, prompting a massive rescue operation. (AP Photo/Schalk van Zuydam)

(AP) -- Authorities on Sunday began the grim task of removing the carcasses of 55 whales that beached themselves and had to be shot despite the frantic rescue efforts of hundreds of volunteers.

Police had to put down 44 of the exhausted false [killer whales](#) to end their suffering, prompting scuffles with distraught locals desperate to save them. The rest died of stress and organ failure and the bodies of three whales who were initially thought to have escaped washed up overnight.

Ian Klopper of the National Sea Rescue Institute said a boat was sent to recover the carcass of a whale stuck on rocks near the beach at Kommitjie.

Authorities warned surfers to be careful of great white sharks circling in the frigid water in search of any remaining bodies.

Although few bathers venture into the water during the [southern hemisphere](#) winter, surfers take to the waves all year round.

The seas around Cape Town are teeming with great white sharks as well as whales during the winter months.

The front pages of Sunday's newspapers bore graphic photographs of the tragic scenes that played out on Kommitjie beach all day Saturday. "And then came death," read the caption in the Sunday Times.

The whales started beaching early morning. Hundreds of people wearing wet suits against the bitter cold braved high winds and rough waves to try to push them back to sea with the midmorning high tide. But they kept swimming back to the beach.

Authorities briefly considered transporting the mammals, which weigh about one and a half tons, by truck to the nearby deep-water naval base at Simons Town but then decided the health of the whales had deteriorated too much and that the only solution was to kill them with a single shot to the brain.

Gunshots rang out across the long, rain-drenched beach as police desperately tried to clear the area of onlookers who had flocked to the shores in hope of a happy ending which turned nightmarish. Authorities advised anybody traumatized by the operation to seek counseling.

Nan Rice of the Dolphin Action and Protection Group said the decision to euthanize the whales was only taken after it became clear the animals would not be able to survive the night on the beach.

"They were weakening already. The animals wouldn't have been able to swim out," she told the South African Press Association.

"The fact of the matter is that during the night, you probably would have people coming out of the bush to cut big chunks out of them. And we couldn't have people posted there all night because of the weather."

She rejected public criticism of the decision to kill the beasts and the lack of contingency plans to cope with the mass beaching.

"You can't be sentimental, you have to be serious," she told SAPA.

"It's quick. The bullet goes straight through the brain and the whale dies in a few seconds. But they (the public) get hysterical and start acting like prima donnas and throw themselves on the beach and have to be carried away by the police," SAPA quoted her as saying.

The department of the environment said that the carcasses were being moved away in convoy by truck to a landfill site. Marine scientists would dissect the whales for research purposes before burying them.

It said the reason for the stranding remained unclear.

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2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-05-safricans-bodies-beached-whales.html>

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