

Rescuers fail to save beached whales in Florida

August 11 2009, By Rafael A. Olmeda

Hundreds of onlookers cheered Monday afternoon when a beached mother whale was reunited with her calf on a southern Florida beach, the mother frantically thrashing about and splashing water into the air.

But the joy was short-lived as rescuers and others gathered on the shore realized the mother whale's life was rapidly reaching its end, and the baby's death was soon to follow.

"This ultimately is a tragic story," said Blair Mase, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's expert on stranded marine life.

The story began in the early afternoon, when beachgoers and lifeguards noticed the pair. Some saw the mother first, a 16-foot beaked whale weighing about 2,000 pounds, according to Mase. Others said the baby, about 6 feet long and 200 pounds, was the first to head to the shallow water.

Well-meaning swimmers immediately tried to help the whales back out to sea, which goes against the advice of marine mammal experts.

"If they're on the beach, you keep them on the beach," said Vincent Canosa, chief of the Hollywood Beach Safety Unit. "Pushing them out only hurts them."

Some small children seemed to know early on that the story of the two whales would have an unhappy ending.

"Mom, don't take a picture," said Danielle Zachary, 9, of Aventura, Fla. "It's too sad."

She and her mother, Michelle, 42, stayed at the beach as the drama unfolded, hopeful as both mother and [calf](#) seemed to be headed back to the open water, only to watch helplessly as the mother swam in circles and then darted back to the shoreline.

Rescuers from the Marine Animal Rescue Society and NOAA joined lifeguards and others who placed wet towels on the mother to protect her from the afternoon sun. The calf was brought back to her mother a short time later, drawing cheers from the hundreds who had gathered to watch.

Rumors spread quickly that the pair were to be taken to the Miami Seaquarium, but that turned out to be wishful thinking.

"There's no aquarium that has this species in captivity," Mase said.

Beaked whales, native to the Florida coast, are deep feeders, officials said. For them to have come to shore at all was a major sign of distress. Their survival was questionable from the start, Mase said.

Sure enough, a few minutes after the mother whale was reunited with her calf, she stopped thrashing. Mase confirmed she had died, and while rescuers' attention began to focus on the calf, some were already saying there was no way it would live.

"The baby's too young to survive on its own," said Sophia Barrett, 18, of Hollywood, who has studied marine biology from the time she started middle school until her high-school graduation this year. "It would just suffer."

Her words were echoed by Mase and by Vanessa Lane, spokeswoman

for the Marine Animal Rescue Society.

The calf was euthanized, and both animals were taken to a NOAA facility in Key Biscayne, Fla., officials said. Not much is known about beaked whales, so experts plan to study the two carcasses.

NOAA responds to an average of one to two beached [whales](#) a year in South Florida.

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