

56 pilot whales die after stranding on NZ beach

September 23 2010



In this photo released by the New Zealand Department of Conservation, a dead whale lies in the sand at Spirits Bay in the North Island of New Zealand, Wednesday, Sept. 22, 2010. At least 40 out of 80 pilot whales that stranded themselves on the remote northern New Zealand beach have died, and more whales are joining them on land. (AP Photo/New Zealand Department of Conservation)

(AP) -- Only 24 of several dozen pilot whales stranded on a remote northern New Zealand beach survived a stormy first night ashore despite rescuers' desperate efforts to save them, officials said Thursday.

Large waves and strong winds lashed Spirits Bay as rescuers struggled to move survivors above the tide-line. It was the second mass beaching in the region in a month.

"As of this morning, there have been 24 live animals moved out of the tide up onto the beach out of harms' way," Department of Conservation spokeswoman Caroline Smith said. "The weather is terrible up there. We have 20 knot winds and 1.5 to 2 meter (5 to 7 foot) swells, so it is not possible to refloat them at Spirits Bay."

The 80 animals were spread out over a three-mile (five-kilometer) stretch, Smith said. Officials were planning to use big nets to lift the creatures onto the back of trucks, and move them to more sheltered Rarawa Beach, about an hour south, where they will be refloated.

Rescuers spent Wednesday night on the beach keeping the whales cool and damp. Teacher Te Aroha Wihapi took students there to help cover the whales with wet sheets and tarps.

"It was quite traumatic for some of the younger ones," Wihapi told the New Zealand Herald. "Two of them wanted to hug one of the whales because they saw its eye was weeping."

Department of Conservation area manager Jonathan Maxwell said at least 25 of the animals were already dead when officials first arrived at Spirits Bay on Wednesday, and another 15 had died by nightfall. Another 50 were spotted just offshore, some of which later beached themselves. Officials euthanized some of the weakest and most stressed animals.

"Pilot whales have very strong social bonds and they try to help each other, so more keep getting stuck," said Mark Simpson of [marine mammal](#) protection charity Project Jonah.

In mid-August at nearby Karikari Beach, 58 pilot whales stranded. Despite hundreds of helpers fighting to save them, just nine were eventually floated off the beach and returned to sea.

A pod of 101 [pilot whales](#) stranded on the same [beach](#) in 2007.

New Zealand has one of the world's highest rates of whale strandings, mainly during their migrations to and from Antarctic waters, one of which begins in September.

Since 1840, the Department of Conservation has recorded more than 5,000 strandings of whales and dolphins around the New Zealand coast. Scientists have not been able to determine why [whales](#) become stranded.

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