

New Zealand's wayward penguin faces long swim home

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Wellington Zoo resident vet Dr. Baukje Lenting, left, and manager of veterinary science Dr. Lisa Argilla care for an Antarctic penguin that wound up stranded on a New Zealand beach at Wellington Zoo in Wellington, Wednesday, June 29, 2011. It may be months before the young emperor penguin - affectionately dubbed Happy Feet - fully recovers, and officials are uncertain about when or how it could return home about 2,000 miles (3,200 kilometers) away. (AP Photo/New Zealand Herald, Mark Mitchell) NEW ZEALAND OUT, AUSTRALIA OUT

(AP) -- A young emperor penguin that turned up on a New Zealand beach won't be getting a free ride all the way back to its Antarctic home - but the bird's human friends will at least help it get a little closer.

The penguin - affectionately dubbed Happy Feet - drew intense interest after being spotted on North Island's Peka Peka Beach, about 2,000

miles (3,200 kilometers) from its [natural habitat](#) in Antarctica. The creature's health quickly declined when it began eating sand and sticks, but the bird is beginning to recover.

[Wildlife officials](#) have been trying to figure out how the 3-foot (80 centimeter) -tall bird will return home. They initially dismissed the idea of transporting it to Antarctica because of logistical difficulties and the fear that it could transmit infections picked up during its New Zealand vacation to other penguins.

On Wednesday, an advisory group headed by the Department of Conservation decided officials will help the penguin get part of the way home by releasing it into the [Southern Ocean](#), southeast of New Zealand - and letting it swim the rest of the way.

"The reason for not returning the penguin directly to Antarctica is that emperor penguins of this age are usually found north of Antarctica on pack ice and in the [open ocean](#)," the department's biodiversity spokesman Peter Simpson said.

The area where it will be released is on the northern edge of the region where young emperor penguins are known to live. Simpson said he was unsure how far the penguin would have to swim before reaching its final destination.

Happy Feet, nicknamed after the 2006 animated movie, was discovered on Peka Peka Beach last week - the first time an [emperor penguin](#) has been seen in the wild in New Zealand in 44 years. Experts aren't sure if it's male or female.

The penguin is recovering well at Wellington Zoo, where it underwent a [medical procedure](#) on Monday to help flush out the sand it swallowed after apparently mistaking it for snow. Doctors managed to remove

about half the sand from its digestive system, and zoo spokeswoman Kate Baker said X-rays showed the penguin was passing the rest of the sand naturally.

The creature appears to be doing well and is being kept in isolation in an air-conditioned room filled with large blocks of ice, Baker said.

"The plan from now on is to let him rest, feed him and X-ray him again on Friday or Saturday to see how much sand has passed," Baker said.

Officials are still hammering out logistics for the penguin's return trip home, and said it won't be released until its health has recovered. Until then, it will remain at the zoo.

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