

Scores of pilot whales dead in New Zealand stranding

November 25 2020



Department biodiversity ranger Jemma Welch said 69 whales had already died by the time wildlife officers reached the beach

Almost 100 pilot whales have died in a mass stranding on New Zealand's remote Chatham Islands, conservation officials said Wednesday.

Most of the marine mammals beached themselves over the weekend but rescue efforts were hampered by the area's isolated location, about 800

kilometres (500 miles) east of the South Island, the Department of Conservation (DOC) said.

Department biodiversity ranger Jemma Welch said 69 whales had already died by the time wildlife officers reached the [beach](#).

She said 28 [pilot whales](#), including two that beached on Monday after the initial stranding, and three dolphins were euthanised.

Welch said the animals had to be put down "due to the rough sea conditions and almost certainty of there being [great white sharks](#) in the water which are brought in by a stranding like this".

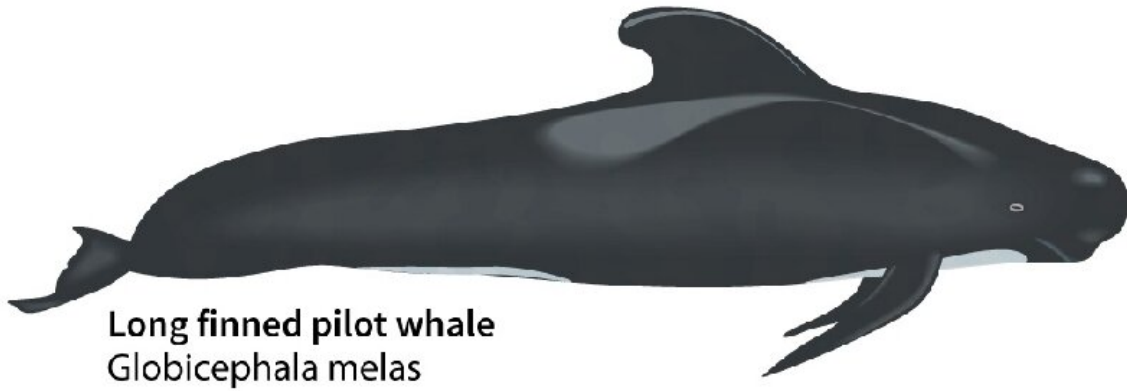
She said members of the local Maori community had performed a ceremony to honour the spirits of the whales, which would be left to decompose naturally.

The Chatham Islands was the site of New Zealand's largest recorded mass stranding, when 1,000 beached themselves in 1918.

Pilot whales grow up to six metres (20 feet) long and are the most common species of whale in New Zealand waters.

What goes wrong in beachings?

Pilot whales are one of the most common species for mass strandings, and like other toothed whales, they use echolocation to find their way



Long finned pilot whale
Globicephala melas

Still a matter of debate, several theories are prominent
Including

- **Sickness**
Diseased individuals have been known to beach themselves. In social pods, groups could be following
- **Predators or prey**
A pod could be forced into danger by predators, or else by following prey
- **Extreme weather**
Bad conditions could scramble sonar, even bubbles caused by raindrops could muddy the data
- **Noise pollution**
Oceans are filled with human-made noises, including shipping and high-frequency anti-submarine sonars
- **Long gently sloping beaches**
Very shallow inclines of some beaches could make it difficult for whales to “see” the danger as their sonar fails to detect any obstructions

Source: Sciencenewsforstudents.org/nzgeo.com/nature.com

AFP

Graphic looking at what we know about whale beachings.

The causes of mass strandings remain unknown despite scientists studying the phenomenon for decades.

Theories include pod members following a sick leader ashore, shoreline geography that scrambles the animals' sonar, the presence of predators and extreme weather.

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