

Increased reporting and improved data collection needed on euthanasia for stranded marine mammals

July 29 2021



Pygmy killer whale live stranded during a mass stranding event on a New Zealand beach. Credit: Rebecca Boys, 2020

New research on the euthanasia of stranded marine mammals has

highlighted the need for increased reporting and improved data collection on the euthanasia of sick, injured or debilitated stranded marine mammals globally.

The Massey University-led study assessed national and international data submitted by various nations including New Zealand to the International Whaling Commission (IWC). A review of the data submitted to the Commission since 2007 revealed a low reporting rate on [cetacean](#) (whales and dolphins) [euthanasia](#) practices, with most data originating from New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

The study, "Deathly Silent: Exploring the global lack of data relating to stranded cetacean euthanasia" recently published in the journal *Animals*, also revealed a significant lack of information on the specific procedures used to euthanise stranded cetaceans globally, including clarity on the equipment and procedures required.

First author Rebecca Boys, a Ph.D. student at Massey's Cetacean Ecology Research Group, says the natural phenomenon of marine mammal strandings is likely to become more common around the world because of escalating human activities in the marine environment.

"We need to assess the methods and effectiveness of marine [mammal](#) euthanasia so we can be sure we are improving animal [welfare](#) outcomes for whales that cannot be returned to the sea."

Ms Boys says very limited data on the welfare impacts of the procedures, including time taken until death were highlighted in the findings of the study.

IWC Executive Secretary, Dr. Rebecca Lent says, "Best practice protocols for cetacean euthanasia were published by the IWC following a meeting of global experts in 2013, and support for those undertaking

this difficult work continues through the IWC Strandings Initiative. Like so many issues, gathering of data is key to increased understanding and improved responses, as has been identified in Massey's latest research."

Research Director for the Cetacean Ecology Research Group Professor Karen Stockin says the review was timely and needed to be considered in the appropriate context.

"New Zealand's continued aim to save whales when they strand should not change, but what does need to change is how we assess welfare and fitness of those to be returned to the water and how we determine the efficacy of all human interventions, whether that be to rescue or euthanise."

In other related research, this Massey University team in collaboration with Dr. Isabella Clegg from Animal Welfare Expertise, has highlighted the limited use of welfare science in conservation efforts for marine mammals. The paper, also published in *Animals*, states there is a need to improve cross-disciplinary collaboration between these scientific disciplines. It says using welfare evaluations in [marine mammal](#) research and management will benefit conservation outcomes.

More information: Isabella L. K. Clegg et al, Increasing the Awareness of Animal Welfare Science in Marine Mammal Conservation: Addressing Language, Translation and Reception Issues, *Animals* (2021). [DOI: 10.3390/ani11061596](https://doi.org/10.3390/ani11061596)

Provided by Massey University

Citation: Increased reporting and improved data collection needed on euthanasia for stranded marine mammals (2021, July 29) retrieved 23 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2021-07-euthanasia-stranded-marine-mammals.html>

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