

Dozens of whales die in New Zealand mass stranding

March 18 2022

New Zealand whale stranding



Map of New Zealand locating Farewell Spit where dozens of pilot whales were found dead in mass stranding on March 17.

More than two dozen whales died in a mass stranding at a New Zealand beach renowned as a death trap for the ocean giants, wildlife rangers said

Friday.

The Department of Conservation said 29 long-finned [pilot whales](#) were already dead when the pod of 34 marine mammals was found at remote Farewell Spit on the South Island late Thursday.

Department spokesman Dave Winterburn said rangers were providing care for five survivors but noted "the whales have now been out of the water for some time".

"While this event is unfortunate, whale strandings are a [natural phenomenon](#)," he said.

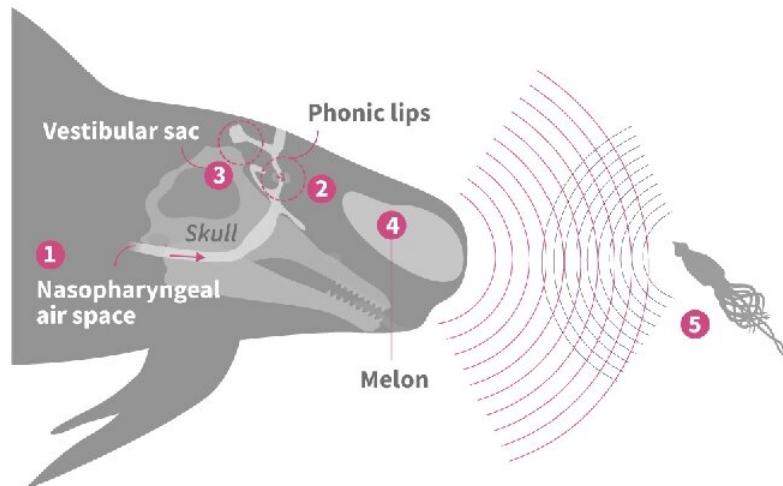
"The cause of this stranding is not known."

Farewell Spit, a 26-kilometre (16 mile) hook of sand that protrudes into the sea, has been the scene of more than 10 [pilot](#) whale strandings in the past 15 years.


The largest was in February 2017, when almost 700 of the mammals beached, resulting in 250 deaths.

Whale sonar navigation

Like other toothed whales, pilot whales use echolocation to find their way



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| <p>1 Whale pushes compressed air through the narrow passage</p> <p>4 Mass of wax and fat called the <i>melon</i> helps to modulate calls and clicks</p> | <p>2 Like vocal chords, the <i>phonic lips</i> shape the sound of the sonar clicks</p> <p>5 The whale “sees” by reading the sound waves that bounce back</p> | <p>3 The clicked air ends up in the cavity known as a <i>vestibular sac</i></p> |
|---|--|--|

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

What goes wrong in beachings?

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

Graphic looking at how pilot whales use echolocation to navigate underwater, and listing various theories about what could go wrong to lead to strandings.

Scientists are unclear about why the beach is so deadly. One theory is that the spit creates a shallow seabed in the bay that interferes with the whales' sonar navigation systems.

Pilot whales, the most common species of whale in New Zealand waters, are particularly susceptible to mass strandings.

The whales, which grow up to six metres (20 feet) long, are regularly found beached in large numbers.

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