

# What killed the whales? Two found dead off the Florida Keys, and one towed to a marina

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A mother sperm whale and her calf off the coast of Mauritius. The calf has remoras attached to its body. Credit: Gabriel Barathieu/Wikipedia/CC BY-SA 2.0

Two sperm whales died within seven days of each other in the Florida Keys, according to state and federal officials.

One was a juvenile whale that died May 4 off Key Largo. The other, a

large adult that died after beaching itself near Mud Key, about 15 miles northeast of Key West in the Gulf of Mexico, was found on Tuesday, according to state wildlife officials.

The adult whale, a male, was towed to Robbie's Marina on Stock Island, just east of Key West.

Kelly Richmond, spokeswoman for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, said the whale is 47 feet long.

"We just started a necropsy on the animal now," Richmond said Wednesday morning. "It will likely take the better part of a day, and even then, we might not have all the results."

Casey Taylor, manager of Robbie's Marina, said he was called at about 4 p.m. Tuesday about the whale.

He said it arrived at the marina via TowboatUS, a sea towing business, around 2:30 a.m. Wednesday. The marina workers used a travel lift to remove it from the water so it would not be damaged by other fish. Taylor said the mammal weighs 40 tons.

The other whale was a newborn female calf that still had an open umbilical cord when it was found on a small barrier island off John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park in Key Largo, said Blair Mase, southeast regional marine mammal stranding coordinator for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Fisheries Service.

"It looks like it just separated from mom, and that was likely the cause of death," Mase said, although the official cause of death is still pending necropsy results.

## How did the whales die?

After someone reported the young mammal swimming alone, rescuers from Dolphins Plus Marine Mammal Responder, a federally authorized whale and dolphin rescue nonprofit, followed it for about a half a mile as it swam to shore, said Allison Garrett, a NOAA Fisheries spokeswoman.

At least one [tiger shark](#) was trailing the 9 1/2-foot-long whale, but Mase said it did not die from bites inflicted by the fish.

"It died naturally on its own," Mase said.

Given that the adult whale that died in the Gulf of Mexico was a male, there is likely no connection between his death and that of the calf that died last week, Mase said. But, it is unusual to have two sperm whale strandings in the same region within such a short time period, she added.

"There were two in a week, so this is something we are keeping a close eye on, and we're trying to find as much information as possible to see what's going on and see why (the adult whale) possibly died," Mase said.

## About sperm whales

Among the common human causes of deaths of [sperm whales](#) and other marine mammals are boat and ship strikes and entanglements in fishing gear, Mase said. As part of the analysis, toxicology samples will be examined to see if any environmental factors contributed to the deaths.

Sperm whales are the largest of the toothed whales, according to NOAA Fisheries. They are named for the waxy substance found in their heads that allows them to focus on sound. It is this substance that made them a target of whaling when it was legal between the early 1800s and 1987.

The substance was used as lamp oil, lubricants and candles, according to NOAA.

Females reach physical maturity around 30 years old, according to NOAA, and can grow to about 35 feet long. Males reach physical maturity around 50 years old, and grow about 52 feet.

Sperm whales live in oceans throughout the world, but are found mostly in [deep water](#), and can dive to depths of more than 10,000 feet and stay under for up to over an hour, federal scientists say.

With whaling outlawed, their populations are recovering and they are still listed as "endangered" under the Endangered Species Act and "depleted" under the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

Anyone who sees an injured or dead whale should call 877-942-5343 (877-WHALE HELP), said Garrett, the NOAA Fisheries spokeswoman.

She said people should keep a safe distance from the animals and not touch them.

"Please don't intervene," Garrett said. "If you can safely get a photo or video, that's great, but do not go near them for your safety and the safety of the animal."

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