

Rescuers 'optimistic' for surviving stranded whales in Australia

July 26 2023



An aerial photograph released by the Western Australia Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions shows 60-70 pilot whales gathering before scores stranded at Cheynes Beach.

More than 50 pilot whales died after stranding themselves on a beach in

Western Australia, but authorities said Wednesday they were "optimistic" that the other 45 whales in the pod could survive.

The pod of almost 100 long-finned [pilot whales](#) was spotted in [shallow water](#) off Cheynes Beach, about 400 kilometers (250 miles) southeast of Perth on Tuesday.

Fifty-one of them died overnight, despite the efforts of [volunteers](#) and staff from the state's Parks and Wildlife Service.

Late on Wednesday afternoon, incident controller Peter Hartley said the surviving whales were being monitored and, once they have been assessed as being strong enough, they would be released.

Volunteers in kayaks will help to herd them past the rocky part of the coast and out into deeper water, he added.

"We're optimistic—we've got to be optimistic in this game," he said.

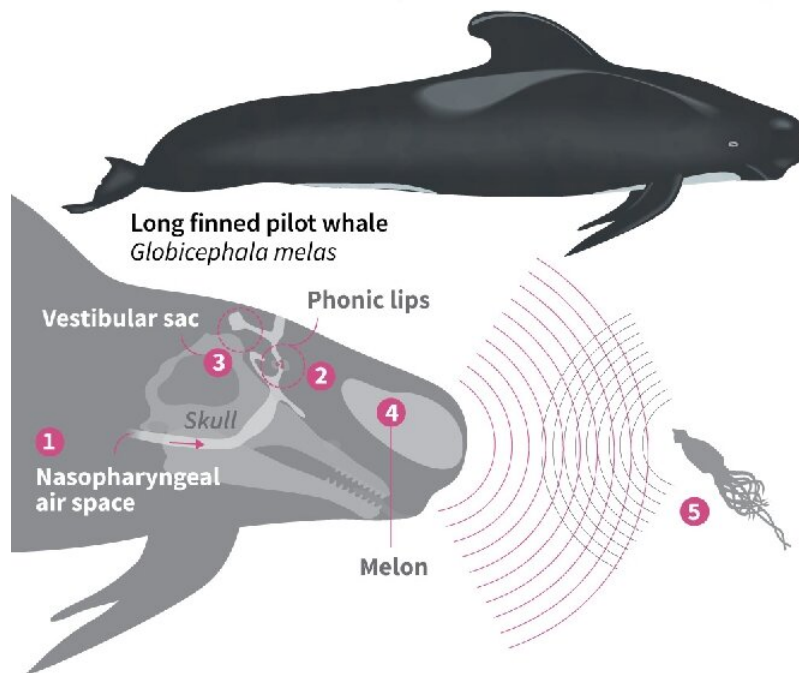
"It's highly stressful for all the people here—volunteers and staff—and you've got to have something to hold onto."

A spokesperson said the Parks and Wildlife Service had been "overwhelmed with hundreds of offers of help" but that it had enough volunteers and the public should "stay away" from the beach "for [safety reasons](#)".

"The priority focus of the Incident Management Team is to ensure the safety of staff and volunteers and the welfare of the whales," they said.

Sonar navigation

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



1 Whale pushes compressed air through the narrow passage

2 Like vocal chords, the *phonic lips* shape the sound of the sonar clicks

3 The clicked air ends up in the cavity known as a *vestibular sac*

4 Mass of wax and fat called the *melon* helps to modulate calls and clicks

5 The whale "sees" by reading the sound waves that bounce back

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

AFP Source: [Sciencenewsforstudents.org/nzgeo.com/nature.com](https://www.sciencenewsforstudents.org/nzgeo.com/nature.com)

Graphic looking at how pilot whales use echolocation to navigate underwater.

"The response zone has a range of hazards, including large, distressed and potentially sick whales, sharks, waves, [heavy machinery](#) and vessels."

Mass strandings of pilot whales are not uncommon in Australia and New

Zealand.

Last October, around 500 pilot whales died when they beached on the remote Chatham Islands in New Zealand.

Scientists do not fully understand why mass strandings occur, but pilot whales—which can grow to more than six meters (20 feet) long—are highly sociable, so they may follow pod-mates who stray into danger.

Bec Wellard, a marine mammal scientist at Project Orca, said the reasons for whale strandings were still not known.

"We still don't know why—if we did, we could perhaps do more to prevent it," she told AFP.

"But with pilot whales, they frequently strand en masse—an individual might be ill or in trouble and the rest of the pod follows them—that can lead them to strand."

Pilot whale

One of the largest members of the dolphin family

Long finned: *Globicephala melas*

Short finned: *Globicephala
macrorhynchus*



Named pilot whales because it was thought that each pod followed a “pilot” in the group

Weight: up to 2,300 kg

Length: 7.6 m

Diet: mainly arrow squid, common octopus, mackerel

Can dive to depths of about 600 m

Distribution

Long-finned pilot whales

- ▶ Commonly seen in tight, sociable pods of 20 - 100 individuals
- ▶ One of the species most often involved in mass strandings

- ▶ Estimated Antarctic population around 200,000

Source: CSM/NOAA Fisheries/IUCN/NZ Department of Conservation



Factfile on pilot whales, the species that has stranded en mass in Tasmania, Australia.

She said that, because of the pilot whales' "strong family bonds", it was important to try to re-float them together.

But she added that, if the surviving [whales](#)' health is compromised, an assessment needs to be made as to whether efforts to refloat them "could just be prolonging their suffering".

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Citation: Rescuers 'optimistic' for surviving stranded whales in Australia (2023, July 26)
retrieved 9 May 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2023-07-rescuers-optimistic-surviving-stranded-whales.html>

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