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Department of Biodiversity,
Conservation and Attractions

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When are whales euthanased?

DEC wildlife officers, with the assistance of qualified vets, always carry out a clinical assessment of sick or injured whales before deciding on the best course of action in each case. Some beached whales die within hours while others may take many days. Euthanasia may be the most appropriate course of action available. The euthanasia technique used is largely determined by the animal's size and location. Generally, a suitable calibre firearm is the most humane and effective method for smaller animals while the focused implosion method, which involves explosives, is the safest and most effective method for larger animals. This method, which is internationally recognised, has been developed and refined over 20 years and results in an instantaneous death while managing risk to the public and staff involved.

Can I help the wildlife officers?

Safety is a primary consideration at strandings. Whales can roll onto people in the water near them, so we ask that you maintain a safe distance from any animals and follow the instructions of DEC staff. Whales and dolphins are powerful animals and can cause serious injuries. They may also carry zoonotic diseases. It is important that members of the public do not attempt to push stranded animals back out to sea as experience has shown that they will re-strand, causing severe stress, injury and death. Volunteers are always needed and are welcome to assist during mass stranding rescues. Volunteers must be registered and follow the directions of DEC staff.

What happens with mass strandings?

The largest mass stranding of whales dealt with in WA occurred in 1996 in Dunsborough. It involved 320 long-finned pilot whales. All but 20 animals survived in this case, however, multiple factors at play including location and weather can affect the survival rate. DEC's incident control system provides a clear reporting structure and well defined roles that have been very effective since it was first applied to a mass stranding at Augusta in 1986. During a rescue first aid is provided to whales, such as keeping the blow hole clear and keeping their skin wet and cool, while plans are made to return the animals to the sea. This may involve transporting whales to safe holding areas where they are treated to counter the effects of being stranded. When wildlife officers carry out rescues, they develop a strategy to deal with the prevailing conditions and take great care to carry the animals gently in slings to minimise distress and prevent damage to tissue and internal organs. Once they are ready to be released they are guided out to sea using boats. The reason why these mass strandings occur is still unknown. There are many theories including the shape of the coastline being a contributing factor, whales responding to distress calls from other whales, or groups following a leader into shore.

Who do I call if I see a stranded whale or dolphin?

To report a stranding, entanglement or a marine mammal in distress, please call **DEC's Wildcare Helpline on 9474 9055**.

To find out more visit www.dec.wa.gov.au

What to do:

1. Think about your safety first.
2. Call the **Wildcare Helpline on (08) 9474 9055** – an available officer will arrive at the earliest opportunity.
3. While waiting for assistance, try not to make much noise.
4. Keep the animal's skin moist with buckets of water where possible.
5. Listen to the instructions of the wildlife officer.

What NOT to do:

1. **DO NOT** put your safety or the safety of others at risk.
2. **DO NOT** stand close to the tail or head.
3. **DO NOT** touch the animal more than necessary – do not push or pull on the flippers, flukes or head, or cover the blowhole.
4. **DO NOT** attempt to push the animal back out to sea – this will only add to its suffering.
5. **DO NOT** apply sunscreen even if the animal's skin is burnt.

Whale and dolphin strandings

Humpback whale



To report a stranding call the
Wildcare Helpline on
9474 9055



Department of
Environment and Conservation



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Humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*)



Photo – Sea Dog Films Pty Ltd

Humpbacks are the fifth largest of the great whales and are noted for their haunting songs. Named because of the distinct 'hump' that shows as the whale arches its back when it dives, humpbacks are more coastal than most of the other large baleen whales. When in a playful mood, they may put on spectacular displays: breaching, rolling, slapping their pectoral fins and generally having a 'whale' of a time.

Description: Humpbacks have knobby heads, very long flippers with knobs on the front edge, and a humped dorsal fin. They are blackish, with white undersides and sides. Males average 14.6 metres and females 15.2 metres long. The maximum length is 18 metres and a mature adult may weigh up to 45 tonnes.

Status and distribution: Humpbacks are widely distributed in all the world's oceans. They were heavily exploited by whalers and their numbers were severely depleted. Their numbers are recovering at a remarkable 10 per cent each year since they became protected in 1963 with numbers on the west coast currently estimated to exceed 20,000. They are listed as threatened.

Migration: Each autumn, in late April to early May, the Australian humpbacks leave Antarctica to migrate northwards to their tropical calving grounds along the west and east coasts of Australia. About August, they begin travelling south to their feeding grounds in the Antarctic, so they can be seen passing through Perth waters from September to November, peaking in October. The first groups to be seen heading south are usually the newly pregnant females, followed by the immature whales of both sexes, then the mature males and females. Mothers with newborn calves stay longest, and travel more slowly, enabling the calves to grow rapidly and develop a thicker layer of blubber for protection in the cold feeding waters they will soon be visiting for the first time.

Breeding: Newborn calves are more than four metres long and weigh about two tonnes. The mother's milk has a 35 per cent fat content and milk production can be as high as 600 litres per day. The suckling calf can gain more than 45 kilograms a day during the first few weeks of life. Nursing ends at about 11 months when the calf can be up to nine metres long.

Feeding: Australia's humpback whales spend the summer in the waters of Antarctica feeding mainly on krill. They are filter feeders, straining their food from the water by means of hundreds of horny baleen plates hanging from their upper jaws. These have bristly edges which mesh to form a filter. A humpback can consume nearly one tonne of food each day. They feed where large concentrations of prey are available.

Stranding history: Humpback whales often become entangled in ropes. The Department of Environment and Conservation has developed safe rescue techniques and has successfully rescued numerous entangled humpback whales along the WA coast. There is little rescuers can do to help stranded humpbacks, as these huge animals are impossible to move. Such animals may have to be euthanased to end their suffering.

Where to see them: Following their recovery from the brink of extinction, pods of humpbacks are once again becoming a spectacle as they pass close to the coast on their journey south. In the north-west they pass the proposed Dampier Archipelago Marine Park near Karratha and marine parks at Ningaloo and Marmion. They can also be seen off the Leeuwin-Naturaliste coast and Albany. Regular whale watching tours operate from Perth, Augusta, Dunsborough, Kalbarri, Coral Bay and Exmouth in season and are highly recommended.



Photo – D K Coughran

Frequently asked questions

Strandings in Western Australia

The Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) is responsible for wildlife conservation in WA and DEC officers are usually the first people called to a marine mammal stranding. DEC wildlife officers have gained vast experience with strandings over the years and are highly respected in Australia and internationally, regularly exchanging advice and information through networks and workshops. DEC also works closely with local authorities, volunteers and service providers during stranding incidents.

Which whales and dolphins live in Western Australian waters?

A total of 35 cetacean (whale and dolphin) species have been recorded in WA waters, which is more than 80 per cent of the 43 species found in or close to Australia. Humpback whales are among the most frequently sighted great whales in WA waters. Their annual 13,000 kilometre migration takes them from Antarctica to the warmer waters off the state's northwest to breed and give birth from May to June and they return with their new calves by December. The west coast humpback population, once hunted to near extinction, is currently estimated at more than 22,000 and is recognised as one of the most successful populations in the world to recover from whaling.

Southern right whales are a much anticipated in-shore visitor, although only few more than 2,000 individuals visit Australia during their breeding season on the south coast to give birth and nurse their calves. Some of them move up the west coast, as far north as North West Cape, and may be seen close to shore, just behind the breakers, which can lead people to mistakenly believe they are about to strand. Other marine mammals that we are fortunate to encounter include bottlenose dolphins, blue whales, long-finned pilot whales and false killer whales.

What happens when a marine mammal strands?

Strandings of marine mammals – many of them single animals – occur much more frequently than most people realise along the extensive coastline of WA. Not all strandings are reported as they often happen in remote and unpopulated areas. There are many successful rescue stories involving toothed whales and dolphins of small to medium size. However there are also many sad cases when rescue is not possible and in most instances, particularly involving baleen whales such as humpbacks, the animals will only come ashore when they are very sick or dying. There is little wildlife officers can do to help stranded humpbacks as these whales can weigh in excess of 40,000 kilograms and they are too big to move without causing severe damage and injury. Intervention in these situations represents a serious risk and DEC's most important priority is to the safety of the public and staff. The death of beached baleen whales can take many days and DEC must determine if the provision of palliative care to allow the whale to die naturally or euthanasia to end the animal's suffering is in the animal's best interests.