Volunteers turned out in force to rescue beached whales following two mass whale strandings at Busselton in Western Australia's south-west.

Stranded!

by Mitzi Vance and John Carter

Since 1984, there have been 21 mass strandings of whales and dolphins along the coast of Western Australia. The majority of these have occurred in the State's south-west, in particular, along a stretch of coastline between Busselton and Augusta—an area most commonly known for its stately forests, rugged coastline, superb beaches, wineries and other attractions.

It was in this area, along Geographe Bay in and near the popular tourism town of Busselton, that the two most recent mass whale strandings occurred within a two-month period. The superlative rescue efforts that ensued cemented Western Australia's reputation for marine mammal management and, once again, highlighted the spirit and generosity of the community. The efforts of volunteers, the private sector and government officers helped to turn the tide of what could have been tragedies into two of the most successful whale rescues ever undertaken in Australia.

Pilot error

Early on a Sunday morning, 3 April 2005, 19 long-finned pilot whales (see box) beached themselves at a number of locations along a 35-kilometre stretch of Geographe Bay, between Siesta Park and Peppermint Grove Beach. The last whale stranding in the area, involving seven Gray's beaked whales, was in 2003. At nearby Dunsborough, WA experienced its largest whale stranding in 1996, when 320 long-finned pilot whales beached themselves.

Busselton Police reported the stranding to the local Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) office, which immediately began to coordinate a whale rescue operation. CALM officers were dispatched to investigate and found four dead whales at Port Geographe Beach, the initial stranding site. The rescue strategy swung into action, with the main objective being to ensure the wellbeing of the surviving 15 whales and encourage them to return to the open sea.

CALM requested help from the Busselton community in tending to the whales. The call for volunteers was answered loud and strong, as residents and tourists descended on the stranding locations to offer assistance. Some came with wetsuits and warm gear to help directly with the whales. Others brought food, drinks and logistical help. CALM Senior Project Officer Tammie Reid and CALM Blackwood officers Neil Taylor and Mark Pittavino were given roles as public information officers for the rescue. CALM and the West Whales volunteer group soon had the volunteers registered and working on different tasks to help the whales. The volunteers were divided into teams and allocated a stranded whale to look after. This involved stabilising the whale's condition by keeping it moist

Previous page
Main Volunteers struggle to hold one of the beached whales upright.
Photo – Jeff and Sarah Henderson
Insets (clockwise from top) Long-finned pilot whale with its freeze branded identification number; a pilot whale on the morning of the release; the false killer whale stranding; volunteers 'holding' a whale upright.
Photos – CALM and Jeff and Sarah Henderson

Above The forward operations point for the long-finned pilot whale stranding in April.

Left Volunteers place a long-finned pilot whale in a sling to transport it to Port Geographe Beach.
Photos – CALM

and covered to prevent sunburn. Long-finned pilot whales can reach up to six and a half metres long so, while they are not a huge whale species, they are very substantial animals.

Local vets constantly monitored the health of the eight whales held at Port Geographe Beach, with some whales being injected with vitamins and antibiotics to assist their survival. By this time, the local business community and volunteers had helped CALM to erect tents and had begun to supply hot drinks and food to the teams in the water. The register of volunteers proved to be extremely beneficial, as it enabled CALM to interchange volunteers so that much needed breaks could be provided during the long cold night. A fresh team of volunteers, headed by CALM landscape architect Lisa Archer with her group of surfing friends, arrived at 2.00 am on Monday morning to replace the tired teams that had spent a long day and night assisting the whales.

Meanwhile, CALM officers began to transport seven whales that had stranded in other locations, by means

Mass strandings (involving more than three animals) since 1984

1984 Albany 9 short-finned pilot whales: all were found dead.
1986 Augusta 114 false killer whales: 96 released, 18 died.
1988 Augusta 84 false killer whales: 32 released, 37 died, 15 euthanased.
1989 Augusta 24 striped dolphins: 11 released, 13 died.
1990 Mandurah 10 bottlenose dolphins: 10 released.
1991 Lombadina 9 short-finned pilot whales: all died within a few hours of stranding.
1991 Sandy Point 38 short-finned pilot whales: all died within a few hours of stranding.
1993 Denmark 4 Gray's beaked whales: 3 released, 1 died.
1994 Mandurah 4 bottlenose dolphins: 4 released.
1996 Dunsborough 320 long-finned pilot whales: 300 released, 20 died.
1997 Exmouth 6 spotted dolphins: all found dead.
1997 Exmouth 7 killer whales: 3 released, 4 died.
1998 Coodamurrup Beach 6 striped dolphins: 5 died, 1 euthanased.
1998 Useless Loop 8 bottlenose dolphins: 8 released.
2000 Cheynes Beach 4 false killer whales, all found dead.
2002 Trigalow Beach 58 false killer whales: 6 released, 46 died, 6 euthanased.
2003 Busselton 7 Gray's beaked whales: 4 released, 3 died.
2003 Doubtful Island Bay 9 sperm whales: all died.
2005 Busselton 19 long-finned pilot whales: 13 released, 6 died.
2005 Busselton 123 false killer whales: 122 released, 1 died.

Whale stranding at Augusta in 1988.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

Long-finned pilot whale (*Globicephala melas*)

Pilot whales are probably so-called because of their reputation for piloting fishermen towards schools of fish.

These whales are brownish-grey to black (*melas* means 'black' in Latin), apart from a pinkish anchor shape on the undersides. They are also distinguished by a high, bulbous forehead (*Globicephala* means 'ball-like head'). The long, sickle-shaped pectoral fins that are pointed on the tip are at least a fifth of the body length. Their dorsal fin is low and long at the base. These mammals usually have a grey saddle patch on their back, and a grey streak behind the eyes. The maximum length is six and a half metres, with males larger than females. Calves are less than two metres long at birth.

The long-finned pilot whale is abundant and widely distributed in the cold temperate waters of the southern hemisphere and North Atlantic. It feeds largely on squid and the movements of these abundant invertebrates probably determine the daily activities and seasonal movements of pilot whales. The species was hunted for centuries in the North Atlantic for its meat and oil. Its normal lifespan is between 30 and 50 years, with calves born every three to four years. Pilot whales are essentially oceanic. They are thought to navigate by means of clicks and communicate by whistling. They live in groups of tens or hundreds.

Pilot whale strandings are common throughout the world. They tend to strand, both individually and in herds of up to several hundred, such as the stranding of 320 long-finned pilot whales at Dunsborough in 1996.

of trucks and slings, to join the main pod at Port Geographe Beach. This rescue strategy was based on the known strong bonds that exist among whales of this species, thereby minimising the risk of any whales restranding once they were herded back out to sea.

Transportation of the whales to Port Geographe Beach proved to be a laborious, long task, with the last whale relocated to the main pod at 2.00 am on Monday, 4 April. During this time, two more whales died. It was decided that because of dangerous conditions posed by the dark, and the unlikely chance of success at this time of night, the whales would not be released until daylight on Monday morning. A net was placed to hold them in and keep the volunteers safe from other marine creatures.

At 11.00 am on Monday, accompanied by prayers and whoops of joy from people on the beach, the whales were released from the temporary holding point and guided out to sea with the help of boats operated by volunteers and CALM staff. The 300 CALM staff and volunteers who had tended to the whales during the stranding, some of whom had given their marine wards names such as Moby and Nemo, gave them a huge send off with shouts and cheers. Two of the whales split from the main pod and headed straight to Cape Naturaliste. The main pod was escorted out to sea until 6.00 pm and, when the rescuers were confident that the whales were in deep enough water, the boats returned to shore. Aerial surveillance continued for several days, but there were no further sightings of the pod.

The rescue operation had been an

Above left background Geographe Bay at sunset.
Photo – John Kleczkowski/Lochman Transparencies

Left Forest Products Commission officer Mike Carter and a volunteer holding a long-finned pilot whale through a long night.
Photo – CALM

Right Paddlers herding the long-finned pilot whales from the shore towards the waiting boats, which would then take them to deeper waters.
Photo – CALM

Below False killer whales beaching themselves.
Photo – Paul Smoker

Below right The distressing sight that greeted beachgoers just after the false killer whales stranded.
Photo – Murray Dix

arduous but rewarding challenge with great success. Little did those involved know that, less than eight weeks later, another mass stranding would occur on their doorstep.

Whale of a problem

CALM's Busselton office received a phone call in the early morning of Monday 2 June 2005 to say that a large pod of false killer whales had become stranded on a beach near Bower Road in Busselton. This was much larger than the stranding in April, with initial reports estimating there were 50 to 60 whales. A second stranding was reported at 9.30 am, involving 51 whales at a beach on Dolphin Road. In total, there were 113 stranded whales, with a pod of 10 remaining offshore—the second largest stranding to occur in WA's south-west in the past 20 years. The mammoth effort needed to undertake a rescue of this size required enormous people-power, and a call for help was put out throughout the south-west region and Perth. Once again, peoples' generosity and commitment to help shone through. Within a few hours, more than 1000 volunteers had assembled on the beach.

CALM quickly established teams that were deployed to the stranding sites and to monitor the third pod of whales that remained offshore. In the meantime, the Busselton community had rallied, and wetsuits were delivered, boats launched, tents erected and food and drink donated by many local businesses. CALM wildlife officers arrived from Perth and local veterinary advice was obtained to identify any injuries and to gauge the stress of the animals during rescue operations.

The same strategies used during the previous rescue were employed, with the whales kept moist and covered—the priority being to re-form the pod before herding the animals back out to sea. As it was a wet, cold, wintry day, with an outgoing tide, people were shown how to use slings to move the whales back into the water by using their hands to dig the sand out from underneath while still keeping the animals wet. Backhoes were bought in to help with this digging.

Keeping them afloat

By early afternoon, a number of whales had been successfully pushed out to sea to rejoin the pod of whales offshore. Boats were used to herd the refloated whales out to the pod, as well

as to keep the pod offshore and to stop them from restranding. The weather was worsening, with rough sea conditions, and there was real concern about people developing hypothermia if they spent too long in the cold water overnight. CALM rescue manager Greg Mair decided to get the pod together and move them into deeper water that night—a risky decision considering the large number of whales.

The whales stranded at Dolphin Road were all herded out to the offshore pod and, with the help of the boats, herded towards the Bower Road site. Teams of 12 used slings and sheer strength to move the remaining animals (though they are smaller than long-finned pilot whales, adults still average around five metres long) through the breaking waves towards the sea. It was hard work, but people persevered and soon the second pod was in deeper water. One whale turned back to shore, but people rushed into the water to prevent it restranding. Boats crewed by CALM staff and volunteers herded the struggling animals from Dolphin Road towards the main pod a few hundred metres offshore. Once it had re-formed, the pod was escorted towards Cape Naturaliste and deeper water. The whales progressed exceptionally well, moving at eight knots until they were left at 6.00 pm, when the light diminished. Further surveillance did not report any signs of the pod of whales.

It was a remarkable achievement to herd more than 100 stranded whales back out to sea within eight hours, with only one death. This amazing result was testament to the efforts of the 1000-plus volunteers who turned out in force to help rescue efforts and a number of groups and agencies, including the Busselton Volunteer Marine Rescue Group, the Shire of

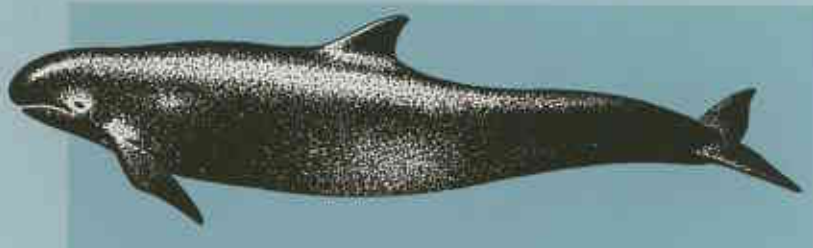
False killer whales (*Pseudorca crassidens*)

False killer whales often form herds of more than 100 individuals and of both sexes and all age groups, and appear to have strong social cohesion. They are occasionally driven ashore in Japan and eaten and are sometimes drowned in drift nets.

They are medium-sized whales with a long, slender body and a narrow, tapered head with a rounded snout. The dorsal fin is high and curved and the narrow, tapered pectoral fins have a distinctive hump, or elbow, on the front edge. They are black with a grey chest, and the sides of the head are sometimes light grey. Average length is 4.6 metres for females and 5.4 metres for males. Calves are about 1.5 metres at birth.

False killer whales are found throughout the world, in all tropical and temperate seas. They are sometimes seen close to the coast in cooler waters, but tend to be oceanic, rarely approaching land unless there is deep water nearby. They are playful and readily bow ride, sometimes leaping right into the air. They thrive on squid and large fish and may attack groups of small dolphins. These mammals breed all year round and are thought to have a long gestation period.

Large herds of false killer whales sometimes strand themselves dramatically on a beach. In 1986, 114 false killer whales stranded en masse at Augusta: 96 were successfully returned to the sea. In 1988, another large pod of false killer whales was stranded near Augusta. Thirty two of them were returned to the sea, but a separate mass stranding of 24 whales about 30 kilometres east of Augusta was discovered too late and 15 had to be euthanased.



Above left The massive community response to the false killer whale stranding.
Photo – Gary Farrelly

Above Mid-afternoon, when an attempt to release the false killer whales was imminent.
Photo – Jeff and Sarah Henderson

Busselton, the Department for Planning and Infrastructure, the WA Police, the Department of Fisheries and the West Whales volunteer group.

The rescue effort was lauded internationally as one of the most successful rescues ever achieved, and highlighted the considerable expertise being developed by CALM in marine mammal conservation.

Both strandings demonstrated the spirit of the Western Australian community. While there may not be another stranding for months, there is always the possibility that there will be one tomorrow or later today. Whatever the future holds, we can rest assured that CALM and the community have the skills, enthusiasm and commitment to undertake major wildlife rescues over and over again.

Right Volunteers try to turn a false killer whale towards the beach.
Photo – Jeff and Sarah Henderson

Below False killer whales return to deep water after the rescue.
Photo – Heidi Palmer

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Volume 21 Number 1 SPRING 2005

contents

48 Bald Island getaway for Gilbert's potoroos

A 'holiday' for two critically endangered potoroos provides new information for scientists hoping to improve the status of the species.

56 Discovering Walpole's spineless wonders

Local community members unite with scientists in an inspiring research project at Walpole.

Regulars

3 Contributors and Editor's letter

9 Bookmarks

The best of the South West
Gogo fish!
Rica Erickson – A Naturalist's Life

18 Feature park

D'Entrecasteaux National Park

20 Endangered

Western ringtail possum

62 Urban antics

Lice, mites, ticks and crosses.

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