

# Dolphins die after stranding near Cape Leeuwin

At least nine Spotted Dolphins (*Stenella attenuata*) died after being stranded on a beach near Cape Leeuwin earlier this year. The fate of another four dolphins stranded at the same time but pushed back into deeper water by local residents and fishermen is unknown.

The dolphins were first seen by amateur fishermen in the early morning of Thursday, 18th June on a beach located about half-way between the Cape and the entrance to nearby Hardy Inlet. A local P.W.D. employee, Mr. Castledine, was one of several people who went to the dolphins' assistance. Although none of the animals showed signs of injuries, nine were already dead. There was nothing to indicate why the animals were stranded, whether through pollution, threat from predators, faulty navigation or some unknown biological instinct which drove them ashore.

Mr. Castledine said the four dolphins still alive were carried from the beach to the quieter waters of Hardy Inlet where they were released. One of the animals

transported to the inlet was a small juvenile. Mr. Castledine said when it was originally found on the beach the young animal had been uttering a succession of cries. It held its eyes tightly closed for the entire time it took to transport it to the Inlet.

The stranded animals varied in size with the largest measuring 2.04m in length.

Spotted Dolphins have not previously been recorded off Western Australia although they would be expected to occur in these waters. They belong to the Genus *Stenella* which comprises the smallest of the dolphins. Spotted Dolphins are among several species which are known to associate with tunas, a fact many fishermen in the tropics take advantage of by deploying their nets around schools of dolphins that in the hope that tunas will be present underneath them. Consequently, many dolphins are caught in the same net and, despite efforts by fishermen to free the animals, some deaths almost always occur. However the number of deaths has been greatly reduced in recent years following a major research programme and introduction of special nets and procedures.

This latest incident is not the first record of strandings in the Cape Leeuwin area. In March, 1976 it was reported that 35-40 dolphins had swum ashore near the mouth of the Hardy Inlet. Many of the beached dolphins resisted attempts by

tourists, local fishermen and residents to push them back into the sea, as some were freed only to swim onto the beach once more. However, some of those pushed or towed into deeper water were seen to swim away and it was hoped these animals survived their ordeal. A total of about 18 dolphins died in the incident.

Further north, at Quindalup Beach, two Pilot Whales became stranded in November, 1980. Despite repeated attempts to tow the animals into deeper water they persisted in returning to shore where they eventually died. Their carcasses were finally disposed of at sea.

A rather more unusual record of a beached whale was made at South Beach, near Fremantle, in August this year. An adult female Pygmy Right Whale (*Caperea marginata*) was washed ashore with no obvious signs of injury apart from the loss of much of its dark skin pigment, which probably occurred following death.

The Pygmy Right Whale, not to be confused with the Southern Right Whale, is a little known species of baleen whale. Although confined to southern waters it has rarely been recorded and almost never identified at sea. Less than one hundred sighting reports have come from beached specimens in New Zealand, Australia and South Africa. Most of Australia's sightings have been made in Tasmania and South Australia. Only one other confirmed record of a Pygmy Right Whale washed up on a West Australian beach exists and that was from more than 12 years ago when some bones identified as belonging to the animal were

▼ These Spotted Dolphins died despite assistance from local fishermen and residents. — Photo P. Lambert



▼ The mottled ventral surface of these dolphins are characteristic of the Spotted Dolphin. — Photo P. Lambert





▲ This female Pygmy Right Whale was washed ashore dead at South Beach, near Fremantle, earlier this year — only the second time this whale has been recorded off Western Australia — Photo C. Young

discovered east of Esperance on the south coast.

As its name suggests, the Pygmy Right Whale is a relatively small whale, rarely attaining a length greater than six metres. The South Beach specimen measured 5.7m in length.

The whales are thought to inhabit

coastal waters throughout the lower half of the southern hemisphere and probably feed on plankton.

After being washed ashore, the South Beach specimen was examined by staff of the Western Australian Museum who also removed samples for the Museums' collection, including the animals skull for display. The remains of the whale were buried but a decision on whether to preserve the entire skeleton for the Museum has still to be made.

With recent increased public interest in marine mammals, a more

concerted effort is under way to ensure that efforts are made to rescue any that beach themselves alive, and to obtain maximum information from those that cannot be rescued or that arrive dead on the shore. Anyone finding a beached animal should immediately contact the local Fisheries and Wildlife Officer or the W.A. Museum. If the animal is already dead, the remains should be hauled out of the highest tide but otherwise not disturbed. A photograph, a note of the total length and a record of whether the animal has teeth or baleen plates would be very useful.

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