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Western Wildlife



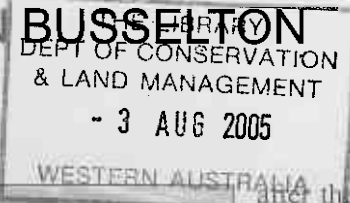
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NEWSLETTER OF THE LAND FOR WILDLIFE SCHEME

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WHALE BEACHINGS IN BUSSELTON

Cherie Kemp



The first whale stranding occurred in the early hours of Sunday 3 April 2005 and continued through to Monday 4 April 2005. Nineteen Long-finned Pilot Whales had beached themselves along 20km of the Geographe Bay foreshore from Peppermint Beach to Siesta Park.

The telephones started ringing at CALM, Busselton between 7AM and 8AM in the morning with people reporting sightings in various locations along the coast, the main pod being at Port Geographe. The word was put out throughout Busselton that volunteers were needed on the beach at different locations and people started arriving all along the beaches willing to help the whales.

Wetsuits were donated from local dive shops, boats were offered from owners and the phones were ringing hot with offers of assistance in all areas. Tents were erected with a media tent, catering tent and volunteer station for volunteers to sign in. Food and drinks were delivered and were provided continuously throughout the day, and volunteers changed shifts when they felt too cold or needed something to eat or drink.

With the whales being scattered along the coastline, it was decided that, because Long-finned Pilot Whales are a social group of marine animals, the best approach was to get the whole pod together before taking them into deep waters. So, an operation proceeded to look



Long-finned Pilot Whales on Busselton beach before volunteers arrived. (Photo: Murray Dix)

after the main pod at Port Geographe while the other whales were transported by various methods to the Port Geographe location.

Volunteers had many interesting stories to tell. One lady said that when one of the largest male whales (7m) was brought around the groyne by a boat, all the other whales started moving around and making noises, apparently happy to see him. Another noted that when photographers entered the water to take photos of volunteers, the whales lifted their heads to

smile at the cameras. Everyone had their favourite whale and many volunteers even named their whales – Moby, Baby, Nemo and Sponge Bob were among the names.

It was decided that the whales would need to be kept overnight, looked after and taken to deeper waters in the morning, so the operation was expanded to accommodate this. Fires, barbecues, hot showers, hot food and drink and big lighting systems were bought down onto the beach. A second shift of CALM staff and volunteers arrived to take over for the night and allow the daytime shift of volunteers to go home and rest to return the next day. The following day volunteers were called in with surfboards, surfskis and small boats to assist in the release of the whales. These were used to herd the whales out, with the assistance of all the spectators on the beach and the volunteers in the water making noises. Once out past the groynes the larger boats took over and escorted all the whales in the pod around the Cape and into deeper

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continued from page 1

waters, the larger males then took the lead and showed them the way. A job well done by all involved.

The second whale stranding in Busselton occurred on Thursday 2 June 2005. At 8AM on the Thursday morning the calls came, this time of over 100 whales had beached themselves. There are stories of the whales "making a rush for the beach" as spectators watched in horror at two locations approximately 500 metres apart. A smaller pod of whales stayed out in the water. The difference this time was the weather, there were storms due and the water was freezing cold and rough.

Again, the operation geared up with tents, wetsuits, food and drink, and very quickly lots of volunteers turned out from local areas. Local schools arrived with food because even though children under 16 could not be in the water, they wanted to assist in some way. The tide was going out and volunteers used slings to get the whales back into the deeper water and off the beach. Backhoes were bought in to dig trenches either side of the whales to assist the volunteers.



Kathleen O'Brien

The weather was getting worse and by lunchtime it was extremely cold on the beach and even colder in the water. Volunteers needed to change over more regularly to get warm and have hot food and drink. Because the bad weather was moving in fast, the decision



Volunteers at Busselton assisting the stranded whales.
(Photo: Gary Farrally)

was made by CALM staff to get the whales back into deeper water that very afternoon to avoid the storm. The volunteers were informed of this.

The first and smaller pod of whales were taken into deeper water by the volunteers, turned towards awaiting boats and released with the boats herding them out to a waiting area approximately 100m offshore. This was very successful and so it was the second pod's turn to go. Loud speakers were battling against the strong winds with CALM Wildlife Officers informing the volunteers what would happen and what was required of them for the successful release of the pod. Within minutes, one by one, the volunteers quickly and efficiently turned their whales around and sent them off to

be greeted by the awaiting boats. The second last whale was a bit of a straggler and everyone stood on the beach to watch. The boats slowly and gently closed in behind the last straggler as some of the front whales had already joined with the pod out in the water. The Wildlife

Officers said that once all together, the whole pod supported the slowest one as they moved into deeper waters and around the Cape. One whale had unfortunately died on the beach - possibly being already ill - and could have been the cause of the stranding.

The call came in later that afternoon and night that the operation was successful and all returned whales were out and around the Cape. In the morning the spotter plane was sent up to have a look and as the whole community held their

breath, the word came back that there were no signs of the whales. Another successful operation!

The funniest story from this stranding came the following day when it was all over and a little boy arrived in the CALM office at Busselton demanding to see the whales, when he was told they had gone out to sea, he said "No, bring them back - I want to see them".

All age groups, from all areas of life and all areas of the State, not just Busselton, were involved in these operations which were so successful only as a result of the generous support of the community.

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