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# Marine Mammal Strandings in Hawaii

## An Overview and FAQ's



Approximately 20 cetacean (whale and dolphin) strandings occur in the Hawaiian Islands in an average year. The Pacific Islands Regional Office (PIRO) of NOAA Fisheries, along with various partners, responds to these strandings to render care when possible or to humanely euthanize sick or injured animals to reduce their suffering when recovery or rehabilitation is not feasible, and to retrieve carcasses of deceased animals. When marine mammal carcasses are retrieved we try, whenever possible, to determine cause of death and gather other important information. During our efforts to determine the cause of death, we frequently need to conduct a necropsy (animal autopsy). In addition to helping to determine the cause of death, conducting a necropsy can provide a great deal of information about Hawaii's cetacean populations, local ecosystem health, and the occurrence of common and unusual diseases that may affect other marine mammals or other species. Cause of death investigations, including necropsies, can also help identify signs of human interaction, such as foreign body ingestion, entanglement, acoustic impacts, and intentional killings.

PIRO makes every effort to engage Hawaiian cultural practitioners in marine mammal stranding responses, whenever possible. We invite participation by cultural practitioners to help us be culturally respectful to the individual animal and to the community where the stranding occurs. Our goal is to continue to expand this effort, while remaining in compliance with the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) and Endangered Species Act (ESA).

## Marine mammal strandings – general information

Stranding is a general term used to refer to situations when marine mammals (whales, dolphins, and seals) swim or float onto shore and become “beached” or unable to return to the sea. Strandings can result from many different causes, including disease, injury, entanglement, disorientation, and starvation. As air-breathing mammals, cetaceans (whales and dolphins) strand when they become incapacitated and seek physical protection and support. Stranding allows them to keep their blowhole above the water’s surface so they can breathe.

While most stranded cetaceans are found dead, some stranded cetaceans remain alive. It can be very dangerous for untrained people to approach or interact with live stranded cetaceans. Stranded animals should not be approached or handled by anyone except those trained and authorized by NOAA Fisheries.

All marine mammals (live, dead, and body parts) are protected by the MMPA. The Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program was formalized by the 1992 Amendments to the MMPA, and NOAA Fisheries was designated as the lead agency to coordinate related activities. Stranding networks have been established in all coastal states to respond to marine mammal strandings. NOAA Fisheries regional offices authorize organizations and individuals participating in stranding networks to help ensure the safety and welfare of both humans and animals. Through a regional coordinator, regional offices, including PIRO, oversee, coordinate, and authorize response activities, and provide personnel training and other support.



### What should I do (and not do) if I encounter a stranded whale or dolphin?

Immediately contact the NOAA Fisheries toll-free marine mammal hotline: (888) 256-9840 whenever you encounter a stranded marine mammal. It is helpful if you are able to remain on the scene to provide information to the response team while they are on the way and when they arrive, but safety is always the most important priority. Always maintain a safe distance from the stranded animal and take whatever precautions are necessary to ensure your safety and the safety of those around you.

Never attempt to push live stranded marine mammals back into the water – this will almost never be helpful for the animal. Pushing an animal back out in the water usually prolongs their suffering and makes it more difficult for response

staff and veterinarians to render aid when they arrive. Never touch or handle a live or dead marine mammal; even small dolphins can be quite powerful and unpredictable and can cause serious injury when untrained people attempt to hold or move them. Disease transmission from live and dead marine mammals to humans and dogs is also a risk.

### Who is authorized to respond to marine mammal strandings?

NOAA Fisheries maintains a permitted program, the Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program, which oversees and regulates all responses to stranded marine mammals in the United States. To be in compliance with federal law, all responders must be authorized as a regional stranding network participant through an MMPA Stranding Agreement (in accordance with MMPA Section

112(c) and section 403), or through MMPA Section 109(h), which gives authority to state and local government officials and employees to humanely take marine mammals in the course of their official duties under certain conditions. Across the US, there are nearly 120 organizations that are authorized via MMPA stranding agreements to participate in stranding responses. These include universities, educational organizations, public aquariums, state agencies, and other non-governmental or non-profit organizations.

To be authorized to participate in marine mammal stranding responses, non-governmental organizations must be issued an MMPA Stranding Agreement by NOAA Fisheries. To be considered for issuance of a Stranding Agreement, organizations must meet several established criteria. These criteria specify qualifications and requirements,



including lead individuals qualified to oversee the program with prior marine mammal expertise, access to marine mammal veterinary services, personnel and facility capacity, and resources to carry out a diverse array of response activities. Staff and volunteers must receive periodic training to adhere to best policies and procedures, comply with regulations, and to learn about new techniques with oversight from a NOAA Fisheries Regional Stranding Coordinator.

Unless you are an appropriately authorized individual, you should not physically interact with (handle, hold, pour water over, etc.) a whale, dolphin or monk seal. Unauthorized interaction with a stranded marine mammal may be considered an unlawful “take” under the MMPA.

Take is defined under the MMPA as “to harass, hunt, capture, or kill, or attempt to harass, hunt, capture, or kill any marine mammal” (16 U.S.C. 1362) and further defined by regulation (50 CFR 216.3) as “to harass, hunt, capture, collect, or kill, or attempt to harass, hunt, capture, collect, or kill any marine mammal. This includes, without limitation, any of the following: The collection of dead animals, or parts thereof; the restraint or detention

of a marine mammal, no matter how temporary; tagging a marine mammal; the negligent or intentional operation of an aircraft or vessel, or the doing of any other negligent or intentional act which results in disturbing or molesting a marine mammal; and feeding or attempting to feed a marine mammal in the wild.”

### How have we recognized marine mammals as important in Hawaiian culture?

Through partnerships with cultural practitioners, researchers and others, PIRO has worked hard to become better informed about the Hawaiian cultural significance of marine mammals. We have worked with partners across the state to learn about a variety of traditions, practices, and customs, as well as local knowledge related to marine mammals held by a large number of individuals and communities. We have often worked with practitioners associated with specific ahupua’a (land divisions) to help incorporate and perpetuate traditional practices and protocols.

Our overriding goal has been to handle marine mammals in a culturally appropriate manner to the maximum extent allowable considering the law and human safety. Hawaiian cultural

practitioners, including kupuna (elders) and kumu (teachers), have participated in stranding response events to oversee and guide traditional and customary practices and to conduct various cultural protocols, including mele pule and/or oli (prayers, chants), for live and deceased marine mammals. In several cases, PIRO has made arrangements so that skeletal remains or cremated remains of stranded marine mammals have been buried on land or placed in the ocean directly by cultural practitioners. In other situations, particularly in the case of large whales, burial on land has occurred with practitioners conducting cultural protocol before and during the burial.

### What are some examples of how we have worked with Hawaiian cultural Practitioners?

Since 2005, PIRO has worked to include Hawaiian cultural practitioners in numerous marine mammal responses. Examples include:

- Kauai – Cultural protocols were conducted for an orca at the stranding location on Poipu beach and at the burial site. Cultural protocols were conducted on several occasions for dead monk seals, including at Poipu for a monk seal that died from a gunshot wound.
- Oahu – Cultural protocols for a stranded pilot whale in Heeia, Kaneohe, were conducted at the time of stranding and later during placement of the whale’s ashes. Remains from two dolphins were placed in waters off Waimanalo under direction of a practitioner, and several monk seal and cetacean protocols were conducted at various locations.
- Maui – Cultural protocols were conducted for a Risso’s dolphin in Paia and a pygmy whale in Kihei.

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- Molokai – Cultural protocols, involving students, were conducted at the location of a pilot whale stranding and at the burial site in Halawa valley.
- Lanai – A cultural protocol was conducted at humpback whale stranding location near Shipwrecks Beach, along with consultation with experts on appropriate burial practices for other stranding events.
- Kahoolawe – Skeletal remains of a bottlenose dolphin found floating offshore were returned for traditional disposition of the remains; other cases involved minimal sampling of dead stranded cetaceans and leaving the remains in place as requested by cultural advisors.
- Hawaii Island – An ash scattering protocol was conducted at Milolii for a spinner dolphin and a protocol for beaked whale was conducted at Ka Lae (South Point). Ash scattering protocol was conducted at Keokea for a monk seal that had died in a fishery interaction.

### How are marine mammal parts distributed to those interested in obtaining skeletal remains?

Following the rules implementing the MMPA and ESA, PIRO may grant access to marine mammal parts (such as skeletal remains, baleen, or tissues) for research purposes. Researchers must demonstrate a bona fide academic research endeavor. Marine mammal parts may also be provided for educational purposes to an acknowledged educational facility or equivalent. Interested individuals may send a letter of request to possess a marine mammal part for research or education purposes to PIRO. We will review the request considering the MMPA requirements and, if the request is authorized, we will issue a letter authorizing the retention of the part for educational or research use.



The MMPA's implementing regulations (50 CFR 216.22(c)(5) and 50 CFR 216.37(a)) authorize the transfer of marine mammal parts if: (1) the person/ agency transferring the part does not receive payment for the part; (2) the marine mammal part is transferred for scientific research purposes, curation in a professionally accredited scientific collection, or educational objectives; (3) an accession number, authorized or assigned by NOAA Fisheries, is affixed to the marine mammal part; and, (4) the marine mammal part is shipped in a manner in keeping with shipping regulations and the part is prepared in a manner that does not pose a human and/ or domestic or wild animal health threat.

### What are other ways we have promoted collaboration with practitioners on marine mammal stranding response?

Over the past several years, PIRO has funded contractors to serve as cultural liaisons and invited grant proposals focused on facilitating enhanced collaboration on stranding response with Hawaiian cultural practitioners and community members. In 2014 and 2015, PIRO solicited grant proposals for projects that facilitate participation of native Hawaiian cultural practitioners in marine mammal response activities and/ or that facilitate transfer of marine mammal parts for cultural educational

objectives pursuant to the MMPA. In addition, partnerships with Hawaiian practitioners and community leaders are priorities included in several agency plans, including the Main Hawaiian Islands Monk Seal Management Plan, PIRO Strategic Plan, and 2015 and 2016 Annual Operating Plans.

### What are our plans for further enhancing our work with practitioners in the future?

PIRO has initiated a partnership with Hawaii's Department of Land and Natural Resources and the Office of Hawaiian Affairs to facilitate communication and coordination between PIRO and Hawaiian cultural practitioners and other interested parties regarding further integration of Hawaiian cultural practices with our marine mammal program. The goals of this partnership include establishing a system for evaluating and coordinating requests for marine mammal parts and developing a broader network of practitioners to work with us to integrate Hawaiian cultural practices within our marine mammal protection, recovery and response efforts.

