

Marine Mammal Strandings

Seeing a live marine mammal stranded on the shore can be a confronting experience. Before assisting the animal there are a few important facts you need to know.

When you see a live stranded marine mammal (whale, dolphin, seal or sea lion), your first instinct might be to rush to the animal and immediately put it back into the water.

Before doing anything, you must first 'check for danger' to ensure that your health and life are not at risk.

There are a number of environmental factors to consider, including weather, waves, temperature, currents and shark presence. It is also important to have personal protective wear to ensure that your safety is the number one priority before responding to help a marine mammal.



Image: Stranded bottlenose dolphin

Strandings

It is common for healthy seals and sea lions to haul out on the beach and rocks. This is not a stranding, please keep your distance from the animal/s and keep your dogs away.

Whales and dolphins strand for a number of reasons including sickness, injury, disorientation, or if a dependent calf has been separated from its mother. It is important to keep this information in mind before attempting to help an animal return to the water.

In the case of a very sick or badly injured animal, it may not be in the best interest of the animal to return it to the water. A suitably trained National Parks and Wildlife Service ranger, or an experienced marine mammal vet, should undertake an assessment where possible.

If a whale or dolphin continues to strand after being returned to the water, this tells us it is likely too sick to be returned to sea.

Getting Help

Before assisting with a live stranded marine mammal, it is best to first call your local National Parks and Wildlife Service office or marine wildlife rescue organisation. They can provide you with advice over the phone and/or send experienced personnel with equipment to assist with the incident.

Zoonotic Disease

Zoonoses are infectious diseases caused by pathogens (e.g. bacteria, viruses and parasites) that can spread between animals, including humans.

Marine mammals are known to carry a range of zoonotic, and potentially zoonotic diseases, which include Brucella, golden staph, toxoplasmosis, Q fever and tuberculosis.

Zoonotic diseases can be spread by air, passed through direct contact, or by coming into contact with bodily fluids or excreta.

Before helping any marine mammal (whale dolphin, fur seal or sea lion) you must first ensure that you are wearing protective clothing to protect yourself from potential zoonotic diseases.

This includes:

- **rubber gloves**
- **face masks**
- **eye protection**
- **long pants/sleeves**
- **cover any cuts or abrasions you may have**

Avoid unnecessary touching of the animal. This prevents exposure to bacteria and viruses and will also reduce stress to the animal.

It is important that you don't position yourself near the blow hole or down wind of the blow of a whale or dolphin.

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Please be aware that seals and sea lions may bite, inflicting serious wounds which have a high potential for infection. If you are near a seal or sea lion, do not stand between the animal and the water.



Image: Live stranded humpback whale calf

Live whale or dolphin

If you encounter a stranded whale or dolphin, and only if you have the appropriate protective wear on hand, there are a few things that you can do to make the animal more comfortable.

- Dig out the sand under the pectoral fins so they are in a more comfortable position
- Limit noise and talking around the animal
- Place a wet towel or sheet over the body of the animal- be sure not to cover the blowhole
- Keep the sheets/towels wet
- Avoid walking anywhere near the tail flukes- never step over the animal
- Keep pets away- they could get harmed or even sick

Never drag a whale or dolphin back to sea, or pick them up by their pectoral fins or tail flukes as this can cause further injuries.

Reporting

Much of what science knows about whales and dolphins has been gained through studying stranded animals. It is important to collect as much information as possible from a stranding, including taking photos.

All information about live and dead stranded whales and dolphins in South Australia is recorded and compiled into a database. These valuable records can help scientists to identify potential trends in disease, vessel strike, and

species susceptible to entanglements in fishing gear and marine debris.

Send reports of entanglements and live or dead strandings of whales and dolphins through to your local National Parks and Wildlife Service office, the South Australian Museum or PIRSA Fisheries. Some basic information to report includes:

- Observer name and contact number
- Date
- Time
- Location, including nearest road
- GPS (if possible)
- Size of animal
- Take photos of the whole animal from different views. Photograph the head, dorsal fin, flippers and tail. Try to also include something for scale.

Dead whale or dolphin

If you find a dead whale or dolphin, contact your local National Parks and Wildlife Service Regional Duty Officer, or contact the SA Museum.

Contacts

To report a stranded marine mammal, contact your National Parks and Wildlife Service Regional Duty Officer.

- Adelaide & Mount Lofty Ranges: 0427 556 676
- Alinytjara Wilurara: 0428 253 144
- Eyre Peninsula: 8688 3223
- Kangaroo Island: 0477 334 898
- Northern & Yorke: 0417 883 678
- South East: 8735 1177

Alternative contacts include:

Australian Marine Wildlife Research and Rescue Organisation (AMWRRO): 8262 5452 or 0411 057 551

PIRSA Fishwatch hotline: 1800 065 522 (24/7)

SA Museum: 0434 906 744 or 0421 754 848



Image: Live stranded pygmy blue whale