

Marine Mammal Incident Readiness and Response SOP

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1. What you need to know

1.1. When you need to use this Standard Operating Procedure (SOP)

This document gives guidelines for preparing Operations staff to handle marine mammal strandings and emergencies.

These procedures aim to create a unified national approach for managing marine mammal emergencies

This document does not address operational procedures for attending marine mammal incidents; these are detailed in the [Guidelines for Attending Marine Mammal Strandings](#) (docDM-776969). Districts are responsible for the creation of 'Operational Plans' to address their local variations and needs.

This SOP is relevant to any DOC District with a coastline.

This SOP does not apply to:

- [Entangled whales and dolphins – see the 'Whale entanglement SOP](#) (doc-6748776)
- Oiled wildlife response – these incidents are managed by Massey University's [Wildbase Oiled Wildlife Response](#)

1.2. Where this procedure comes from

Marine mammal strandings are often highly publicised events. This plan sets out the standards for managing marine mammal incidents, strandings, and emergencies as per the relevant legislation and policies.

Marine Mammals Protection Act 1978

All species of marine mammal occurring within New Zealand and New Zealand's fisheries waters are absolutely protected under the [Marine Mammals Protection Act 1978](#) (legislation.govt.nz) (MMPA). The Department of Conservation is responsible for enforcing this Act.

At a stranding the Department is responsible for:

- the welfare of the stranded animals,
- the disposal of any dead marine mammals (including any part of a marine mammal),
- the health and safety of its staff and any volunteers under its control, and the public, and
- enabling any cultural protocols or actions.

Marine and Coastal Area (Takutai Moana) Act 2011

According to the Marine and Coastal Area (Takutai Moana) Act 2011, when making decisions about managing a stranded marine mammal, DOC must:

- ensure that the welfare of the marine mammal and public safety are the primary considerations, and
- have particular regard to the views of any affected iwi, hapū, or whānau.

Conservation General Policy 2019

The [Conservation General Policy 2019](#) (doc.govt.nz) outlines how DOC will implement the Acts that we are responsible for, including the Marine Mammals Protection Act 1978. It provides guidance for the administration and management of marine species, habitats, and ecosystems.

The Policy specifies that tangata whenua, as kaitiaki, will be:

- i. invited to participate in the protection of marine species of cultural importance to them;
- ii. provided with access to the remains of dead marine protected species for customary use, including those incidentally caught in commercial fishing, consistent with relevant legislation and agreed protocols;
- iii. provided with immediate notification of strandings where possible; and
- iv. involved in the management of stranded marine mammals, in accordance with agreed protocols.

Additionally, the General Policy stipulates that:

- carcasses of stranded marine mammals should be left unburied if they are lying in remote places where this does not give rise to a public nuisance, and
- whales and dolphins should not be brought into or bred in captivity in New Zealand or exported to be held in captivity, except where this is essential for the conservation management of the species.

1.3. Who is accountable for this procedure

Whilst the administration and ownership of this SOP sits with the Biodiversity, Heritage and Visitors Group, specifically the Marine Species Team in the Biodiversity Systems and Aquatic Unit, it has been written for Regional Operations staff to use for managing marine mammal incidents and emergencies.

Managers, or higher levels of management, are authorised to approve variation from the SOP requirements and are accountable for those decisions. They are required to use their professional judgement and to seek advice, or to escalate when in doubt. All decisions should be documented. It is expected that variations from requirements in this SOP will be the exception rather than the norm, and that legal (i.e. legislation and judge-made laws) and health and safety requirements are compulsory. Common sense should prevail in the case of exceptional or emergency field situations.

1.4. What you are required to do first

There are no obligatory prerequisites for staff to complete before following this SOP, however responses will benefit greatly from all involved staff having completed the recommended trainings. See the [Marine Mammal Competency Pathway](#) (doc-7668262) for more information. Some specific components of response have training requirements, see below.

Recommended training for incident response:

- [Introduction to CIMS](#) and [CIMS in the DOC environment \(CIMS 4\)](#) - particularly those who might be in Incident Controller or Operations Manager CIMS roles.

- Project Jonah [Marine Mammal Medic](#) course
- [Marine Mammal Incident Response](#) training for DOC internal procedures.

Required training for euthanising marine mammals:

- *Training and competencies are in development*
- Interim workshops are available (see section 3.2)
- These staff must have a Firearms License, as per the [Firearms SOP](#) (doc-5960893), and the [Hunting \(Ground\) Competency](#) (docDM-480129)

Required training for handling genetic samples:

- Staff who take and handle genetic samples must have completed the [Hazardous Substances](#) online course on DOCLearn as per the [Management of Hazardous Substances SOP](#) (doc-6052105).

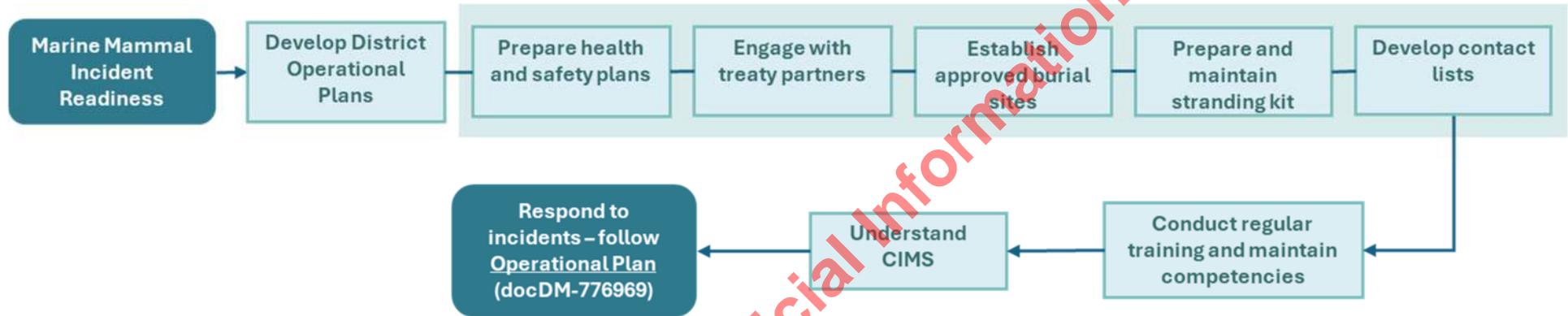
1.5. Glossary

Relevant terms and definitions are listed in a glossary in [Appendix 1](#).

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2. Getting started

2.1. How this all works



2.2. Who needs to use this and what your responsibilities are

Requirement	Who is accountable?	Why?/Consequence	Links
Reviewing the Marine Mammal Incident Readiness and Response SOP every two years	s9(2)(a) Marine Species Team, BHV	Marine mammal incidents are a highly emotive and publicised event. Constant review of best practice procedures will ensure the Department of Conservation is responding to these events in a safe, ethical, efficient and professional manner.	
Communicating changes to relevant staff	Marine Species Team, BHV	To ensure consistent application of national approach to marine mammal incidents around the country.	

Maintaining awareness of the Operational Plan location and initial response procedure.	District Operations Managers	To ensure Districts have the appropriate capability to respond to marine mammal incidents in a safe and efficient manner.	Guidelines for Attending Marine Mammal Strandings (docDM-776969). docCM - Marine Mammal Stranding Operational Plans stocktake (doc-6075030)
Ensuring that staff within their District follow and implement the procedures outlined in this SOP and the Operational Plan.	District Operations Managers	To ensure a nationally consistent approach to managing marine mammal incidents, which can be highly emotive and publicised events.	As above.
Ensuring that within their District an appropriate level of readiness is maintained.	District Operations Managers	To ensure an efficient and professional response is conducted. This prevents the public from attempting a rescue on their own which puts themselves and the animals in danger.	
Developing and maintaining protocols with tangata whenua regarding stranding response, sampling, and disposal of marine mammals.	Pou Tairangahau/District Operations Managers	To give effect to the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi. To ensure appropriate engagement is conducted and tikanga is followed at marine mammal incidents.	See section 8
Following and implementing the procedures outlined in this SOP.	All staff responding to marine mammal incidents and emergencies.	To ensure a nationally consistent approach to managing marine mammal incidents.	

3. What you need to do to prepare for marine mammal incidents

3.1. Develop District Operational Plans

Use the [Guidelines for Attending Marine Mammal Strandings](#) (docDM-776969) as a template for developing your office's Operational Plan. Save your plan with the following name: [Office abbreviation] Marine Mammal Operational Plan [YEAR] onto docCM.

The Operational Plan covers the specific procedures, forms and checklists needed for marine wildlife responses, as well as including equipment lists and contact lists.

The regional/district components of your Operational Plan should be updated annually prior to the 'stranding season' and integrated with other emergency management procedures, for example at the same time as Fire and Health and Safety Plans are updated. Duty/stand-by officer kits should include the updated plan.

District Operational Plans should include the following components:

- [Health and safety plan](#)
- [Local protocols with treaty partners](#)
- [Staff training and capability register](#) (docDM-831790)
- [Local and national contact lists](#)
- [Equipment lists and locations](#)
- [Approved burial sites and procedures](#)
- Maps of coastal access points
- Tide timetables

3.1.1. Prepare health and safety plans

There are a significant range of hazards associated with marine mammal work. These range from hazards associated with contact with the marine mammals themselves, to the environment, equipment used onsite, as well as working with the public and volunteers.

It is the responsibility of each office and all staff to ensure that all hazards are identified and managed appropriately. This should be done by developing a 'Working with Marine Mammals' Safety Plan through [Risk Manager](#). Use the National Template Safety Plan for working with marine mammals (ID 5943) as a starting point. Add and remove hazards as appropriate but be sure to add in any local controls relevant to the District. [Guidance for how to duplicate a safety plan is available](#) (doc-2600866).

Hazards specific to marine mammals include:

- 12880 – Stranded marine mammals (Stranded marine mammals pose a risk to potential rescuers through direct physical harm (i.e. struck with tail) and through the transfer of disease. Recently refloated animals can become aggressive and "mouth" people on the rare occasion).
- 4003 - Marine mammals: sea conditions & tidal currents (crushing of body parts or person by rolling whale; tidal flow dragging people out to sea).

Infection risk

The risk of bacterial infection is significant (especially from seals) but is reduced by taking sensible precautions. Infection can be through fluids, or airborne transfer. People and dogs can be susceptible to infection. Potentially infectious diseases reported in New Zealand marine mammals include tuberculosis, salmonella, brucella and "seal finger" (a virulent necrotising bacteria). References relating to seal finger and diseases in stranded marine mammals are available from the [Toolbox](#) (docDM-1124455). It is recommended that anyone working with marine mammals obtains and reads these publications.

Our responsibilities to volunteers

Volunteers are a common and often vital aspect of marine mammal callouts, especially mass strandings. Where volunteers are involved and DOC is leading the response, we must, as far as reasonably practicable, provide a safe work environment and ensure all volunteers are safe home at the end of the day. Refer to the [Volunteers and Legislation factsheet](#) (doc-2675362) and the [Health and Safety at Work Act Factsheet 2 – Volunteers](#) (doc-2632093) for more information about our responsibilities when it comes to volunteers. If you regularly work with volunteers it may be useful to become familiar with the [Volunteers for Conservation SOP](#) (docDM-1520340).

You may use a [Volunteer Check-in Form](#) (docDM-1007942), however this isn't always feasible during large strandings or if you are unable to maintain a designated entry point. The likelihood of volunteers forgetting to sign out should be considered as well as what actions will be taken. Ensure volunteer details are stored securely.

Further guidance for managing volunteers at marine species incidents is available in Section 3.2.5 of the [Operational Plan](#) (docDM-776969).

3.1.2. Engage with treaty partners

Partnering with Iwi in the development of marine species plans is crucial to promote culturally appropriate and effective conservation strategies. The participation of whanau, hapu and iwi communities guarantees that traditional ecological knowledge is integrated into contemporary scientific practices, thus enriching the understanding of marine ecosystems. Proactive and meaningful relationships based on trust and mutual respect will help in the facilitation of significant consultation processes, which allows knowledge exchange and shared decision making. Such collaboration not only recognises the historical and cultural meaning of marine species to Iwi.

Collaborative research efforts promote inclusion, revealing different perspectives on resource management and contributing to more comprehensive marine protocols. The active participation of Iwi in these initiatives is essential to identify culturally significant species and areas while guaranteeing that conservation measures are aligned with Iwi values and aspirations. In addition, adopting a joint management approach increases the resilience of marine ecosystems and improves social and ecological wellbeing of local communities. Ultimately, prioritise the commitment to Iwi which in turn encourages a holistic understanding of marine problems, which leads to a more effective and sustainable management of marine species and their habitats against environmental change.

It is important that proactive steps are taken to develop a working relationship with tangata whenua regarding marine species strandings prior to an event occurring. You should consult your Pou Tairangahau in the development of this section.

3.1.3. Establish approved burial sites and procedures

Disposal of cultural material

When disposing of marine mammal carcasses, the appropriate disposal of cultural material needs to be considered. Please ensure that your iwi protocols established as a part of section **Error! Reference source not found.** (relationships with tangata whenua) cover this. However, iwi approval to bury carcasses at a location on Public Conservation Land does not remove the Department's legal responsibilities for the protection of heritage sites at the location. The Department remains legally liable for any damage to or destruction of archaeological or historic sites caused by marine mammal burial procedures.

Burial sites

Consultation:

- Burial on site will require approval of the landowner.
- Heritage New Zealand or a DOC Senior Heritage Advisor should be consulted to avoid disturbance of archaeological/heritage sites, if these sites have not already been identified in your Operational Plan recently.
- Tangata whenua should be consulted to ensure wāhi tapu and other culturally significant sites are not disturbed, and that tikanga is followed where appropriate and practical.
- Selection of the burial site should also ensure that it will not affect the habitat of any threatened species.
- You should include in your office's Operational Plan details on appropriate and approved burial sites and any instructions on seeking permission for burials. Make sure you include:
 - Previously established burial sites
 - Available preferred burial sites
 - Information on RMA requirements – is it a permitted activity?
 - Reference any important Areas of Significant Value – ASCVs
 - Identify any Wāhi tapu sites that should be respected
 - Sites protected under the Historic Places Trust.
 - Identified archaeological sites are available in DOCGIS and are being added to MyPM. A DOCGIS layer of approved burial sites may be created in the future.
- Good burial sites are:
 - In a good dry substrate (sand is good, clay or blue pug is bad)
 - Above extreme tides
 - Away from stream mouths (they will shift and uncover burials)
 - Away from erosion

- Above water tables
- Out of vandal range (depth mainly).

Resource Management – District/Regional Plans

If whale carcasses need to be buried without prior documentation (or without being a permitted activity) you should be able to use emergency provisions of your District or Regional Plans. This will probably require retrospective authority. It is worth investigating getting blanket approvals for certain areas.

An example of resource consent approval for burial of marine mammals is [available](#) here (DOC-6061259).

Historic places

Before burying a whale, dolphin or seal, check that the site is not protected under the Historic Places Act 1993. It is an offence under this legislation to destroy, damage or modify an archaeological site whether the site is recorded or not. If anyone wishes to do so, then they need to apply to the Historic Places Trust. In addition, there may be sites of cultural significance that are not listed, consultation with iwi may help to identify these.

3.1.4. Prepare and maintain stranding kit

Below is a general list of the basic equipment required for attending a marine mammal incident. This can be organised into Initial Response Kits, and Full Kits. The following are examples of the type of gear you should have. Your office's gear list might differ slightly, include gear lists and locations in your Operational Plan.

Stranding equipment should be thoroughly cleaned and checked after each use to ensure it is in good working order for the next event. Any item that needs repair or replacing should be fixed as soon as possible after the event.

Regular gear checks should be organised and can be done in conjunction with gear maintenance for fire, training sessions, or on a rostered schedule of every 2-3 months. All staff should know the location of the stranding equipment and be familiar with its use.

Recommended 'Initial response' equipment for all incidents

The initial response kit should have all the basics you need for any event. For a mass stranding it will be enough to get the first on site started, while a second team pulls together additional equipment. This may be from a secondary kit with additional buckets, sheets, slings, shovels, body bags etc., or through sourcing more equipment from local contacts.

- A copy of your District's Operational Plan including:
 - Printed copies of relevant forms
 - Notebook, waterproof paper, pens, pencils
 - Tide tables / maps etc.
- PPEs, e.g.
 - Overalls, disposable overalls or PVC leggings and coat
 - Gloves (rubber, latex, leather)
 - Waterproof gear
 - Boots/gumboots

- Earplugs
- Torch and batteries
- Portable radio and/or mobile phone (and drybags)
- First Aid kit, you should consider:
 - Betadine gel
 - Vicks VapoRub (you can stick some under your nose for decomposed specimens)
 - Barrier cream
 - Antibacterial soap
 - Face masks / respirator / safety glasses
 - Disinfectant for clean-up, e.g. Virkon
- Sampling tools:
 - Tape measure
 - Camera, photo scales and labels
 - Tinfoil
 - Ziploc bag
 - Vials with 70% ethanol, labels and pencils (contact University of Auckland for DNA sampling kit - [DOCDM-892499](#))
 - Tape measure (20m)
 - Permanent marker
 - Pliers, scissors, knife, scalpel etc.
- For stabilising live animals:
 - Buckets
 - Sheets
 - Pillow cases (to make sandbags)
 - Restricted Area Tape
 - Rope/string
- Moving or clean up
 - Shovels
 - Large body bags

Recommended equipment for a secondary kit

Note that the number of each item will depend on what is needed in your area, therefore treat numbers in this list as an example.

- Food and drinking water
- Sunscreen, towels, appropriate PPE including wetsuits
- Binoculars
- High vis vests (coded - DOC), and a set of CIMS coded vests for CIMS roles
- Powerful torch and batteries

- Light sticks
- Biodegradable tape, coloured cotton, marking tape, paint sticks etc for marking whales (3 colours for triage)
- "Do not cross" barrier tape
- Rope for tying carcasses (cattle tags and tag pen for ID)
- Old sheets (a lot, contact hotels for more sheets)
- Buckets x 20
- Slings x 6
- Dolphin stretcher
- Stranding pontoon and dive tanks (optional)
- Spare tape measures
- Wajax pumps, hoses, intake sieve, branches and dams
- 4WD/ ATV
- Appropriate calibre rifle, ammunition and ear-muffs
- Hook slasher - sharpened on the outer edge to open animals prior to burial
- Mega-phone

Recommended equipment for seal / sea lion response

- Heavy leather or canvas gloves
- Nets, e.g., hoop net with open cone at end, examples are available (docDM-904517)
- Sacks (old seed/grain sacks cleaned). Cut one corner cut out and duct tape edges to stop fraying. Small seals can be easily restrained in these, their flippers are held down at their sides and they can get their noses through the hole for fresh air.
- Plywood full-length shields for herding seals
- Scissors, knife, or pole with curved blade on the end (blunted tip, sharp inner curve) for cutting debris off entangled seal
- Noose pole / dog-catcher's pole (optional - enables catching smaller animals from deep rock crevices or to catch from dense groups of animals from a distance)
- Pole with loop fastened at the centre (*optional - allows two people to control a large animal when noose is wound up on pole).

3.1.5. Liaise with other key external parties and develop contact lists

The Operational Plan for your District should contain national and local contact lists.

National expertise within DOC

The [national DOC stranding contacts](#) (docDM-1186392) contains the contact details for key DOC staff nationwide for different areas of expertise, including operational advice, species specific advice, euthanasia and biopsy personnel.

Local DOC staff

Use the [staff training and capability register](#) (docDM-831790) to record key local contacts with relevant skills for marine mammal incident response. Create a list to include in your Operational Plan.

Local external contacts

This should include contact details for your treaty partners. You should also consider what other contacts might be necessary, such as:

- Veterinary advice
- Local government, e.g. council rangers
- Fire brigade
- Local police
- Fixed-wing plane, helicopter providers
- Excavators, earth movers, machinery etc.
- Porta-potty hire
- Security
- Caterers
- Community support groups
- Relevant coastal landowners

National external parties

Key external contacts for marine mammal strandings are available in [the external contacts lists for stranding protocols](#) (docDM-824399).

More information about some of the external parties we work with is below.

Project Jonah

A [Memorandum of Understanding between DOC and Project Jonah](#) was made in 2008, with the premise “that the survival and effective rehabilitation of stranded or injured marine mammals is considerably enhanced if a spirit of mutual respect and co-operation exists between the two organisations.”

Since 2015 the relationship between Project Jonah and DOC has been strengthened through a Service Level Agreement. The [current agreement](#) (doc-7700909) runs from July 2024 to June 2027.

[Project Jonah](#) (PJ) is a non-profit organisation that is dedicated to marine mammal welfare and protection. They have worked alongside the Department for many years, offering assistance at stranding events, and occasionally helping with sick or injured seals

Their involvement in stranded cetacean rescue has spanned more than two decades. They pioneered rescue techniques and technology and invented the world's first whale rescue pontoons in 1985.

Since 1988 they have run whale rescue training programmes, in which members of the public are instructed in basic cetacean first aid and effective re-floating, holding and release strategies. Over the years it has trained DOC staff and other Government agencies overseas.

Once volunteers have completed their training they are added to PJ's national stranding database. Trained medics are available around the country, 24/7 and can be called upon to assist in single or mass strandings events. Please note:

- PJ medics offer their assistance in a voluntary capacity to work co-operatively with DOC stranding control staff at the stranding site.
- PJ medics have varying degrees of skill and expertise. PJ's staff and designated senior medics do have a wealth of knowledge, acquired through years of hands-on experience at stranding sites around the country.
- PJ medics are happy to provide support where it is most needed. This includes providing basic first aid to stranded animals, patrolling beaches (to look for other stranded cetaceans), re-floating, holding and releasing animals, assisting with crowd and traffic control, and helping with measurements, sampling and disposal.

In addition to the provision of trained volunteers, PJ can provide rescue equipment, including dolphin lifting mats, whale rescue pontoons, buckets, sheets, shovels etc.

PJ staff and senior medics can assist in the management of stranding events, in accordance with DOC procedures, if experienced DOC personnel are not immediately available at the time.

If PJ assists during a stranding, you may wish to include the staff or senior medics in the debrief.

Whale Rescue

[Whale-Rescue.org](#) is a group of a small number of people with considerable experience with whale and dolphin rescue responses who are available to provide assistance in the event of a stranding. They are different from Project Jonah in that they do not train up volunteers to become marine mammal medics. They are a small, specialised group that can assist the Department in a range of functions as needed.

Massey University Veterinary Sciences (Palmerston North)

Aotearoa's only marine mammal pathologists are based in Palmerston North at Massey University's School of Veterinary Science (SoVS), led by s9(2)(a)

These pathologists are trained in examining marine mammals to attempt to determine a cause of death or investigate disease. No one else in Aotearoa has this level of training.

DOC has a contract with SoVS to necropsy Hector's and Māui dolphins, NZ sea lions, and other species on request. These other species may be requested if it is an unusual event, or there are signs of foul play.

Massey University Cetacean Ecology Research Unit (CERG) (Albany)

[CERG](http://cetaceanecology.org) (cetaceanecology.org) is led by s9(2)(a) out of Albany, Auckland. Their main workstreams are:

- Health and human impacts affecting cetacean populations.
- Strandings causation and response investigations, with a focus on euthanasia.
- Biology and life history studies which can tell us about population structure, growth, survivorship, mortality, diet, and reproductive biology.

CERG have some long-term research programmes focused on common dolphins and long-finned pilot whales. The team also works on elusive Southern Ocean species including the hourglass dolphin and spectacled porpoise.

CERG regularly conduct dissections, but the focus is usually more about learning how the animal lived, as opposed to how it died. However, an identified cause of death is sometimes possible from the investigation.

University of Auckland

The University of Auckland curates the New Zealand Cetacean Tissue Archive (NZCeTA) under contract from DOC.

The archive was established in 1991 and is one of the world's largest collections of whale and dolphin tissue samples.

Genetic samples allow us to identify species, and sometimes population, of a stranded animal, and can confirm the sex.

Genetic analysis can also allow us to reconstruct the evolutionary relationships between different populations and species.

The purpose of the archive is to collate a large number of samples in order to conduct meaningful studies on populations.

Archiving samples also means we can make use of future technological advances or projects that come up.

More information on the archive is available on the [NZ whale and dolphin DNA archive intranet page](#).

More information about University of Auckland's marine mammal research programme is available on the [Marine Mammal Ecology Group website](#).

Otago University

A number of different marine mammal research programmes are underway at Otago University within a variety of departments. These range from cetacean behaviour, life history and acoustics, population genetics studies of all marine mammal species, to anatomical evolution of cetaceans.

Of note, Otago University has been researching parāoa sperm whales at Kaikōura since 1990, in collaboration with Whale Watch Kaikōura, but has recently expanded their studies to look at sperm whales across other parts of Aotearoa.

The project focuses on studying population demographics, ecology, and behaviour of parāoa.

This parāoa project also utilises skin samples from stranded whales, held by the University of Auckland in the NZ Cetacean Tissue Archive, as well as sloughed skin from live whales, which is collected from the water surface. DNA from skin samples is analysed to investigate connectivity of parāoa between regions, identify kinship relationships, and get a sense of the whakapapa of individual whales.

If a tooth can be extracted from a deceased whale, it can be used to estimate the whale's age. The research team would be interested in aging a tooth if a stranded whale is a previously known individual from photo-ID catalogues, or if local mana whenua are interested in finding out the age of a stranded whale for their own records.

More information:

- [Biology and Conservation of Marine Mammals, Department of Marine Science | University of Otago](#)
- [Whale watch, Features, Otago Magazine | University of Otago](#)

Leopardseals.org

Leopardseals.org is a collective of researchers who are looking to learn more about leopard seals in New Zealand, including occurrence, movement patterns, behaviour, diet, demographic parameters and health of individuals.

As a part of this research, they are permitted to conduct dissections on deceased leopard seals. Samples from dissections will be exported to the Australian Antarctic Division for genetic analysis.

More information: [Leopard Seals in New Zealand waters 0800 Leopard \(0800 5367273\)](#)

Museum of New Zealand - Te Papa

Te Papa is the national museum of New Zealand and a key repository for skeletal material.

There are over 2000 marine mammal specimens in Te Papa's collection. They consist of skeletal material, preserved animals or parts thereof, skins, and casts.

The collection is world famous for its beaked whales and other rare species like pygmy right whales. It attracts visits from both New Zealand and foreign scientists interested in anatomy, evolution, morphometrics, general biology, and taxonomy of whales.

Te Papa also runs an active fossil research programme covering extinct whales, dolphins, and seals.

Collection development relies mostly on strandings, with skeletons cleaned by burial or maceration. Rarely, already prepared skeletons may be acquired from other institutions or private collectors. New additions are based on the general rarity of a species and its representation in the existing collections.

The marine mammal collection comprises roughly 2,000 specimens, including:

- 330 beaked whales
- 550 dolphins
- 140 true seals
- 660 eared seals
- 3 type specimens of currently recognised living (sub)species

More information: [Marine mammal collection | Collections Online - Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa](#)

Regional museums

Regional museums may hold marine mammal material if it isn't requested by Te Papa or other research institutes, as long as they hold a current permit and are able to conduct appropriate treaty partner consultation. Otago Museum and Auckland War Memorial Museum are two institutes who are actively interested in specimens.

3.2. Conduct regular training and maintain competencies

It is recommended that Districts hold a strandings response training or refresher once a year, ideally prior to the summer stranding season. Topics to cover include:

- Response protocols
- Where to find stuff
- Who to contact
- Iwi protocols
- H&S

Other key field skills should be maintained as appropriate to the competency, e.g. CIMS, radios, 4WD use. The recommended competencies specific to stranding response are outlined in section 1.4.

Other opportunities for training include:

- [Project Jonah Marine Mammal Medic course](#) (doclearn.doc.govt.nz)
 - Same as [public course](#) (projectjonah.org.nz/medic)
 - How to care for and refloat stranded whales and dolphins
 - Marine mammal medic competency obtained
 - Online refresher course available
- Internal strandings workshop
 - Delivered by technical advisors (subject to availability of staff)
 - Online or in-person (costs to be covered by District)
 - [Marine mammal incident response competency](#) (doclearn.doc.govt.nz) obtained
- Marine mammal euthanasia workshop
 - Delivered by technical advisor (subject to availability of staff)
 - In-person only (costs to be covered by District)
 - Competency and formalised training is in development.
- CIMS training
 - [DOCLearn - Introduction to CIMS \(Online\)](#)
 - [DOCLearn - Using CIMS in the DOC Environment \(CIMS 4\)](#) (face-to-face)

- On the job training, experiencing strandings

Debriefs after an incident are a great opportunity for learning

3.3. Understand the Coordinated Incident Management System (CIMS)

About CIMS

DOC uses [New Zealand's Coordinated Incident Management System](#) (CIMS) to operate effectively and efficiently when responding to an incident or emergency. Whale strandings and incidents are a conservation and animal welfare emergency, so we suggest the use of CIMS as the framework for responding to sufficiently complex marine mammal incidents. DOC's Emergency Management System (EMS) is aligned with CIMS 3rd Edition.

CIMS is modular and scalable, allowing for a consistent response at any level, from a small local incident to a large multi-agency response. CIMS establishes common structures, functions and terminology. A successful response relies on DOC staff understanding and applying CIMS concepts, roles and responsibilities.

For a complete description of CIMS refer to [The New Zealand Coordinated Incident Management System \(CIMS\), 3rd edition](#) (civildefence.govt.nz).

The DOC intranet has more information about '[Emergency Management](#)' and '[Getting ready for an emergency](#)'.

When should CIMS be used?

A CIMS structure will not always be required in responding to marine mammal incidents, such as single animal strandings, however they are recommended for mass strandings, single strandings of high public interest, and complex incidents involving several external parties. In the CIMS structure, a function does not have to equal a person: in a simple response a single person might be able to manage multiple CIMS functions. The structure is scaled up or down as necessary.

People suitable to fill different CIMS function lead roles should be identified in advance, to expedite the filling of roles in the event of an incident.

The management of an incident or emergency should occur through an Incident Management Team (IMT), where appropriate, following established plans, templates and processes that are available on DOC's intranet.

A detailed explanation of the CIMS functions that may be involved in an incident response is provided in DOC's [Guide to CIMS IMT roles for marine mammal incident response](#) (doc-7340423). This guide should be read and understood by key staff in District offices.

Other roles

Consider identifying the additional following roles specific to marine mammal incidents:

Marine Mammals Officer

Any warranted officer under the Conservation Act 1987, any fisheries officer under the Fisheries Act 1996 and every Constable, is also a Marine Mammals Officer under the MMPA.

A Marine Mammals Officer has the power to euthanise or direct the euthanasia of any aged, sick, distressed or troublesome marine mammal without specific authorisation from the Minister (see section 18(1)(c) of the Act). A Marine Mammals Officer also has the power to advise on the disposal of a dead marine mammal without specific authorisation from the Minister. This includes being able to retain by-caught marine mammals on fishing boats to take back to land for necropsy (see section 18(2) of the Act).

Data collection

This role ensures that all required scientific data has been collected from each individual. They will consult with a representative from the Marine Species Team (BHV) to determine a specific sampling regime and if any other samples are requested by permit holding scientists. They must ensure that iwi have been consulted, and any local protocols have been followed before samples are collected. They are responsible for appropriately collecting and recording the data on each stranded individual (length, sex, measurements, etc), and submitting the data for inclusion in the New Zealand Whale and Dolphin Stranding Database.

Euthanasia Personnel

Staff who are trained and experienced in humane marine mammal euthanasia should be listed in the [Staff training and capability register](#) (docDM-831790). Only these staff will be permitted to euthanise whales at the direction of the [Marine Mammals Officer](#).

As euthanasia is highly emotive it is imperative that the personnel conducting this have the appropriate experience. They, alongside the Operations Manager, will be aware of the number of aspects that need to be dealt with in relation to euthanasia (i.e. counselling bystanders/volunteers, public relation issues, public safety and crowd control).

Note that there may be times, such as when dealing with a sick seal or a single stranded whale, where euthanasia takes place outside a CIMS structure. For more details on euthanasia see Section 5 of the [Operational Plan](#) (docDM-776969).

Disposal team

Should burial be required, this role is responsible for:

- identifying appropriate sites in consultation with iwi, and Senior Heritage Advisors or Heritage New Zealand in accordance with local protocols listed in the [Operational Plan](#) (docDM-776969),
- obtaining landowner's permission if on private land,
- ensuring that all scientific and cultural materials have been collected prior to burial,
- ensuring the security of the site and specimens, and
- overseeing the safety of the disposal team and ensuring all Health and Safety protocols are followed, e.g. above MHWS, avoiding waterways, and opening body cavities of carcasses.

For more detail on disposal, including what your options are, see Section 7 of the [Operational Plan](#) (docDM-776969).

Oil spills

Marine oil spills are not the Department of Conservation's responsibility to manage – (unless we have caused a local tier spill).

In every case, reports of marine oil spills must be reported directly to the Regional Council responsible. Oil Spills are managed under separate Contingency Plans prepared by Regional Councils or Maritime NZ under the [Maritime Transport Act 1994](#) (legislation.govt.nz). For more information about NZ's response to spills and pollution, see the [Maritime NZ website](#) (maritimenz.govt.nz).

The rehabilitation of wildlife is managed by Massey University's [Wildbase Oiled Wildlife Response](#) (massey.ac.nz). DOC may be required to play roles in this work, but this is led by Wildbase.

4. Document records

4.1. Other useful information

For a complete list of forms, protocols, templates, and technical documents, see the [Marine Mammal Stranding Toolbox](#) (docDM-1124455).

Related protocols and documents

- [Guidelines for Attending Marine Mammal Strandings](#) (docDM-776969)
- [Guide to CIMS IMT roles for marine mammal incident response](#) (doc-7340423)
- [Renewed Service Level Agreement with Project Jonah](#) (doc-7700909)
- [Volunteer participation in marine mammal strandings](#) (doc-7144409)
- [Marine Mammal Competency Pathway](#) (doc-7668262)
- [Volunteers for Conservation SOP](#) (docDM-1520340)
- [Marine Species Incident Log template](#) (doc-10219511)
- [Responding to an emergency – CIMS at DOC](#) (DOC Intranet)
- [Marine mammal stranding media information](#) (doc-2598638)
- [External contacts list for marine mammal incidents](#) (docDM-824399)
- [DOC National Stranding contacts](#) (docDM-1186392)
- [SOP Whale and Dolphin Entanglement](#) (doc-6748776)
- [Massey University Wildbase Oiled Wildlife Response](#) (massey.ac.nz)
- Transport within New Zealand Animal Welfare Code of Welfare 2011 - [Transport within New Zealand – Animal Welfare Code of Welfare](#)
- [Temporary Traffic Management \(Guidelines\)](#) (doc-625646)
- [Marine mammal carcass freight guidance](#) (doc-3131307)
- [Genetic sample collection instructions and information](#) (docDM-892499)
- [Accidental Discovery Protocol for Archaeological Sites](#) (doc-6096256)
- [Sample and Permit Register](#) (docDM-855696)

Forms

- [Initial Response Form](#) (docdm-870561).

- [Initial Response Form](#) (docDM-870561)
- [Whale and Dolphin Incident Form](#) (docDM-870555)
- [Whale and Dolphin Entanglement Form](#) (doc-7039170)
- [Seal and Sea lion Form](#) (docDM-870560)
- [Marine mammal sighting form](#) (doc.govt.nz/marine-mammal-sighting-form or docDM-870477)
- [Mass stranding Measurements Form](#) (docDM-1007957)
- [Volunteer Check-in Form](#) (docDM-1007942)
- [Protected shark record sheet](#) (doc-6803842)

4.2. Document history

Date	Details	Document ID and version	Amended by
26/05/2025	Updated into new template, removed out-of-date information and made minor improvements.	Draft 1	s9 (2) (a)
29/05/2025	Formatting changes and quality check completed	Draft 2	
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5. Appendix I - Glossary

Acronyms/initialisms used	
CERG	Cetacean Ecology Research Group
CIMS	Coordinated Incident Management System
EMS	Emergency Management System
MHWS	Mean high water springs (high tide line)
MMPA	Marine Mammals Protection Act (1978).

Acronyms/initialisms used	
MST	Marine Species Team
NZCeTA	New Zealand Cetacean Tissue Archive
SoVS	School of Veterinary Science

Definitions	
Baleen	Course hair-like plates in the mouths of baleen whales in the place of teeth. Used like a sieve to filter food from seawater.
Beach cast	An animal washed up on the beach already dead.
Beaked whale	A group of whales that are one of the least-known groups of mammals due to their deep-sea habitat, reclusive behaviour and apparent low abundance. They are generally bigger than dolphins and the dorsal fin is further back rather than centred.
Blowhole	The hole/s in the top of the head of all whales and dolphins which they breathe through (called a blow). A whale equivalent of a nostril. Whales do not expel water from their blowhole, the mist that is visible when a whale breathes (blows) is vaporised air, mucus, and water that was on top of the blowhole. Water should not be poured down the blowhole of a stranded whale or dolphin.
Bull	An adult male whale.
Bycatch	The incidental capture of non-target species in fishing gear.
Calf	A young whale or dolphin, usually defined as being less than half the length of the adult and staying in the slipstream of an adult.
Carcass/cadaver	The remains of a deceased animal; the dead body of an animal.
Cetacean	All whales, dolphins, and porpoises.
Cow	A female whale, usually referring to mothers, e.g. a cow-calf pair.
Dissection	A post-mortem examination of an animal to study its internal parts, the goal of which is not necessarily to determine cause of death.
Dorsal fin	The fin on a whale or dolphin's back.
Entanglement	Generally means an animal tangled in rope, net, fishing line or other rubbish, can include animals hooked by fishing hooks.
Euthanasia	The humane killing of an animal to reduce suffering.
Flukes	The lobes of the tail of a whale or dolphin.

Foetal folds	Visible creases or lines on the side of a calf from being folded in the womb, can last for weeks or months.
Incident	Any event other than a live sighting of a healthy individual in its natural habitat e.g. stranding, beach cast, entanglement
Large whale	Usually refers to the baleen whales and the sperm whale.
Marine mammal	Any whale, dolphin, porpoise, seal, or sea lion.
Marine Species Team	Team that leads on whales and dolphins within the Biodiversity, Heritage, and Visitors Group and administers the SOP. Two Technical Advisors provides coordination of the national strandings programme s9(2)(a)
Marine teams	The Marine Species Team and the Marine Bycatch and Threats Team. The latter leads on seals under s9(2)(a)
Necropsy	A post-mortem investigation to try to ascertain the cause of death (an autopsy for animals).
Neonate	A new-born whale or dolphin.
NZ Whale and Dolphin Stranding Database	DOC's national database of marine mammal incidents, curated by the Marine Species Team.
Palliative care	Providing assistance to stranded whales to make them more comfortable if they are unable to be refloated or euthanised.
Pathologist	A veterinary pathologist is someone who is trained in animal disease surveillance, prevention, diagnosis and treatment.
Pectoral fins	The pair of fins situated on either side of a dolphin or whale.
Rostrum	A whale or dolphin's beak.
Sector lead	In larger strandings, staff and volunteers will be split into sectors to manage a small group of whales. Each sector will have a lead.
Staging area	A point back from the main action where people filter through to enter a stranding site. People should be briefed before going past the staging point.
Stranding	Technically means live stranded animals but some may use it to refer to incidents in general.
Stranding base	Interchangeable with staging area. Where equipment is stored and briefings occur.
Team lead	If working out of a CIMS structure, the team lead is responsible for the work being carried out.
Throat grooves	Beaked whales have two grooves under their mouths, they are thought to have a function in the whales' suction feeding method.

Throat pleats	Lines along the throat of baleen whales, allowing their throat to expand drastically to accommodate large volumes of water while filter feeding.
Whale	All cetaceans, though usually used to refer to large cetaceans Under the MMPA: All species known as whales, e.g. killer whales and pilot whales, but not species colloquially known as dolphins.

About this document

Disclaimer

This document has been written for Department of Conservation (DOC) staff. As a result, it includes DOC-specific terms and refers to internal documents that are only accessible to DOC staff. It is being made available to external groups and organisations to demonstrate departmental best practice. As these procedures have been prepared for the use of DOC staff other users may require authorisation or caveats may apply. Any use by members of the public is at their own risk and DOC disclaims all liability for any risk.

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